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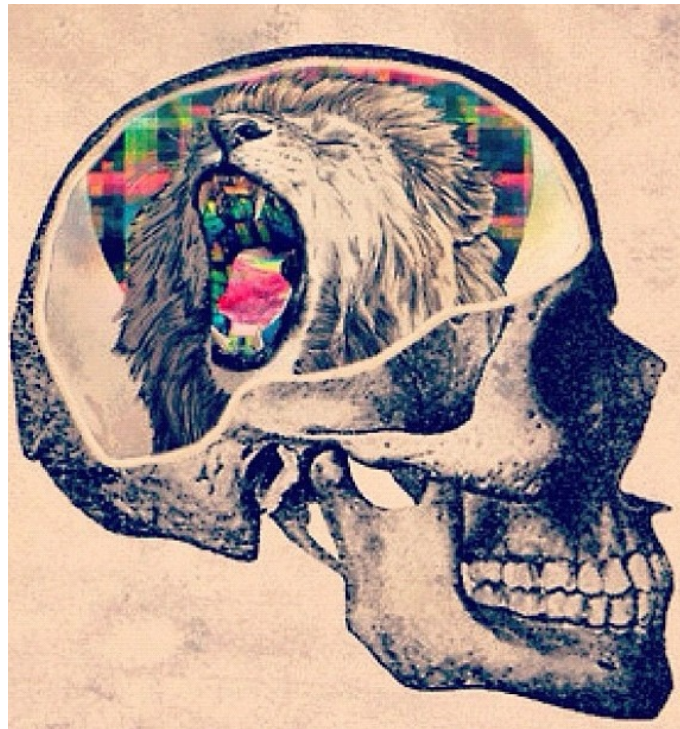
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Re-thinking criticality: Undergraduate students, critical thinking and higher education

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University of Sussex

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

Abstract

Critical thinking is closely aligned with the higher in higher education – as a core element of ‘graduateness’ and a cornerstone of the mission of higher education institutions. Yet while critical thinking is very much ‘part of the furniture’ in the teaching and learning landscape of higher education, I argue that behind this seemingly good, everyday intellectual value lies further complexity and this research re-thinks how critical thinking is a highly contextualised and embodied set of practices.

My fieldwork involved qualitative research with first-year undergraduate students at a research-intensive UK university. I conducted 3 months of loosely structured observation of students in their weekly lectures and seminars for a compulsory module. I focused on two cohorts of students – named as a professional – or applied social science subject and a more traditional academic social science discipline. I also interviewed 15 of these students at the beginning of their first year at university and conducted focus groups with 4 of these students at the end of their first year. These research encounters explored how undergraduate students understand what critical thinking means, what it requires, what it makes possible and its role in their studies, lives and futures. These data were then analysed using a critical, feminist sociological theoretical framework, informed by post-structural and new materialist theorisations. It drew specifically on the theoretical insights offered by Karen Barad and Sara Ahmed and how the connections and clashes in their work offer generative potential for re-thinking critical thinking. I argue that a specifically *feminist* analysis of critical thinking allows both a deeper exploration of how critical thinking legitimates itself through different bodies, as well how it gets constituted through higher education’s structures of power and inequality.

The thesis makes four analytical claims. Firstly, rather than critical thinking representing a cognitive act by reasoned, detached bodies, this thesis explores how it emerges both *through* the web of social, material and discursive knowledge practices that constitute critical knowledge and *with* different bodies that enact it. Instead of understanding pedagogical practices in higher education as fixed and stable, I highlight how the experience of critical thinking shifts in accordance with the social, embodied and relational contexts in which one is entangled at any particular moment. Secondly, I explore how critical thinking is an intensely affective experience. Students appeared to *feel their way through* complex affects of both desiring the transformative power of criticality whilst also wishing to resist it and apply it selectively as a consequence of its negativity. Such concerns over embodying the right kind of critical persona, demonstrate how becoming a critical thinker is not a simplistic act of thought and action but deeply affective processes of *becoming* critical. Thirdly, critical thinking is not undertaken by generic ‘critical beings’ but critical bodies located in the particularities of their social characteristics and differences and the multiple intersecting impacts of these upon their own experiences. Critical thinkers are not neutral subjects but gendered, classed and raced beings and becoming a critical thinker is inseparable from the ways bodies are unequally positioned in the academy. Finally, this thesis explores how neoliberal higher education produces an increasingly narrow economic vocabulary for talking about education’s value and values and a limited grammar for understanding the contextual and contingent nature of critical thinking.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is closely aligned with the 'higher' in higher education – as a cornerstone of the mission of higher education institutions and 'the defining concept of a Western university' (Barnett, 1997, p.2). It also constitutes a core element of 'graduateness', with the UK's Quality Assurance Agency stating that graduates should be able to:

Critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), make judgements, and frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify... solutions - to a problem. (QAA, 2011, p.11)

Consequently, the ability to think critically has become a core learning outcome of undergraduate education, present in the majority of module handbooks, assessment briefs and marking criteria. Yet while critical thinking is very much 'part of the furniture' in the teaching and learning landscape, I argue that behind this seemingly benign, everyday intellectual value lies a more complex story, whereby *becoming* critical is a highly contextualised and embodied set of practices that require further theorisation.

1.1 WHY DOES RESEARCHING CRITICAL THINKING MATTER?

Feminist researchers have long reflected on the impossibility of splitting the 'knowing' self from the situatedness of social enquiry. As a feminist and researcher it is therefore important for me to outline my personal rationale for this project and how these experiences shaped my initial conceptualisations of critical thinking. I spent six years in learning development roles in universities, working closely with students to develop their academic study skills, and with faculty to design effective pedagogies for students' academic-skills development. In this role, I became acutely attuned to the different ways students and staff engaged with critical thinking.

Critical thinking was one of the most common reasons students came to talk to us – from queries about what it *is* to be critical to, crucially, how to demonstrate it in ways expected and valued by their lecturers. Not only was it striking just how *many* students struggled with what it means to be 'critical' but their concerns were strongly marked by the need to get it 'right'. Often they handed me their essays asking '*is this critical enough?*' - suggesting a desire for a 'quick fix' and conceptualising critical thinking almost as something as easy to judge its presence in writing as correct spelling or grammar. The fact that, in return, I responded with a fairly complex answer challenged their original intentions to checklist for straightforward evidence of it, against set marking criteria. Furthermore, this almost *technological* approach to doing and evidencing critical thinking was at odds with my

personal understanding of criticality as interrogating knowledge for inherent bias and hidden power.

While in our informal discussions, students engaged with evidence, gave counter-arguments and evaluated debates; they struggled to connect this to institutional performance indicators of critical thinking - as enacted through formative and summative assessment. While it may be tempting to explain students' apparent lack of engagement with critical thinking as a result of a decline in standards (Hayes, 2005), a depoliticised student body (Swain, 2014) or the 'death' of critical thinking (Evans, 2004) – something more subtle was occurring. It was not simply that students did not understand *what* critical thinking was and *why* it was important but that they struggled to articulate it in ways they thought were expected of them as university students. In particular, when it came to writing it down, many felt they did not have the aptitude, words or confidence to do so. This supports Bailin *et al.* (1999) who describe how critical thinking acts as a normative enterprise to regulate standards of writing and behaviour in higher education. What is additionally concerning is that most students who came to seek study-advice were those deemed 'Other' in higher education - particularly first-generation (the first in their immediate family to attend university), mature students (defined by HEFCE as being over 21 at the start of their first-degree) and those for whom English was not a first-language. This has parallels with work on academic literacies, which describes the socially situated nature of writing and knowledge practices and their power to act as exclusionary discourses for 'non-traditional' students (Lea and Street, 1998, Burke, 2008, Lillis & Scott, 2008). Potentially, critical thinking constituted a similarly exclusionary practice as one of the key 'rules of the game, that lurk beneath the surface rationality of academic meritocracy' (Morley, 2013, p.116).

This led to the most prominent motivation for this research, which is an interest in social justice and the politics of inclusion. A 2015 HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) report showed that the least-advantaged students (those from low socio-economic backgrounds, black and minority ethnic and disabled students) were overall less likely than their peers to complete their course, get a good degree (defined as being a 1st or 2.1), and be satisfied with their university experience. Such differential outcomes were related to multiple factors including relationships between staff and students and among students, students' social and cultural capital and, crucially here, engagement with university teaching and learning practices. The authors state that institutions need to foster more inclusive teaching, learning and assessment strategies in order to close these outcome gaps. The NUS vice-president Sorana Vieru (2015) argues further that such gaps

are the result of the dominant, exclusive 'white, male and stale' university culture in which traditional methods of teaching and assessment privilege certain groups such as the privately educated who are more adept at learning how to 'play the game' (paras 6-7). Therefore from a social justice perspective, it *matters* whether differential student outcomes are caused by curricula and learning environments that are not inclusive. Beginning with a sociological interest in the hidden curriculum, I became concerned with *who* is included/excluded by pedagogies of critical thinking, *how* and *why*.

How to design effective pedagogies for developing students' critical skills was also a key concern of the faculty I worked with, who predominantly conceptualised the 'ideal' student as one capable of critical and independent thought. Almost every student assignment I encountered had a critical element to it e.g. asking students to critically evaluate, analyse or discuss - in line with QAA recommendations. Yet when talking to staff about how they teach and assess criticality, it was often a case of teaching it implicitly via a gradual socialisation of students into 'academic' thinking and assessing it via notions of 'I know it when I see it'. Definitions also varied across disciplines, mirroring Moore's (2011b) analysis of the multiple definitions of critical thinking used by university academics. Indeed, there was a distinct lack of clarity about what critical thinking *is*, how it should be taught and how students learn criticality effectively - despite it being described as a core value of academics' pedagogical practice. This aligns with Davies (2011) who, in a special issue of a journal about critical thinking, argues that 'disturbingly, despite our best intentions, it appears we are teaching very little of it' (p.255).

Furthermore, when discussing pedagogies for developing students' critical thinking, the common response from (often overworked) academics was for me to deliver a one-off workshop - telling students 'everything they need to know' about critical thinking in an hour. This response is understandable; modules take time to be approved and instigating large-scale pedagogical change requires a clear evidence base. Indeed, the latter can be particularly difficult to demonstrate for critical thinking because, as my thesis argues, its affects are less tangible and often difficult to pick apart from other aspects of becoming a 'successful' university student. But it also seemed as if the critical and feminist pedagogical techniques I was suggesting e.g. the use of small, peer discussion groups, enquiry based learning activities and fostering a culture of supportive debate in the classroom were at odds with a pedagogical context of large, impersonal lectures, decreased assessment opportunities and widening staff-student ratios. Evans (2004) argues that such practices of compartmentalising and measuring knowledge, which increasingly dominate higher education classrooms, instrumentalises learning such that critical thinking is now 'dead' in

the academy. Her analysis forced my attention towards the current *state* of critical thinking in higher education.

1.2 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

Because undergraduates constitute the ‘life-blood’ of the academy, this thesis investigates students’ perspectives and enactments of critical thinking in their first-year at university. It asks what students think critical thinking is and what thoughts they have about its impact on their education and life outside and after university. In order to unpack normative understandings of what it means to be a critical student, I also consider whether students’ individual starting points at university (their life experiences and social characteristics) affect their engagement with critical thinking. In so doing, I employ a broad conceptualisation of critical thinking to consider a range of undergraduate experiences as ‘sites’ of critical thinking and go beyond the classroom to consider whether criticality can be an emotional and social experience, as well as a pedagogical and intellectual one. My analysis is based on data collected from interviews with fifteen undergraduates from two social science disciplines; three months of loosely structured participant observation with the broader first-year cohort of these students and a focus-group discussion. A feminist poststructuralist and new-materialist analysis is applied to the data to *trouble* everyday notions of critical thinking.

My thesis is purposively evasive in not beginning with a fixed definition of critical thinking. As I will discuss, critical thinking represents a diverse, and highly contested, set of discourses that are produced through higher education’s relations, bodies and pedagogies. It is difficult to define with certainty because it is not a simple *doing* but represents an embodied *enactment* drawing on a whole set of social, material and discursive drivers and practices that cannot always be easily unpacked. In working with the notion of multiple definitions I turn to theorists (specifically Sara Ahmed and Karen Barad) who allow me to engage with such conceptual complexity, rather than always seeking to bring it to order. Indeed, I argue that it is fundamentally more productive to focus not on achieving certainty about what critical thinking *is* but on exploring what critical thinking *does* (to higher education’s relations, bodies and pedagogies).

In addition to the [Introduction](#) which has outlined the intellectual beginnings, theoretical framework and content of my study, this thesis comprises ten chapters:

[Chapter 2](#) *The Place for Critical Thinking in UK Higher Education* outlines key policy developments and resulting cultural shifts that have come to constitute the ‘neoliberal

academy' - specifically the policies of higher education massification and marketisation and their resulting pedagogical consequences epitomised in notions of student and staff performativity. This context has prompted new questions about the financial and intellectual value of a degree in which it becomes significant to question what *place* and what *value* critical thinking has to the millions of students who pass through higher education institutions each year.

[Chapter 3](#) *Thinking about Critical Thinking* reviews the received thinking about critical thinking. It highlights the multitude of definitions of what critical thinking *is* and *is for*, presents key debates informing critical thinking research and evaluates literature on how critical thinking is enacted through the pedagogies and practices of higher education. It argues that individualised and decontextualised rationalist or skills approaches to critical thinking obscure the complex interconnections between critical thinkers, their identities and their context. Consequently, there remains a need for scholarship that is attentive to the complexity and contingency of higher education's intellectual values.

[Chapter 4](#) *A Feminist Methodology for Researching Critical Thinking* sets out a critical, feminist sociological theoretical framework for expanding critical thinking's lexicon. It argues that applying feminist theory to what is often seen as a gender-neutral subject allows a deeper exploration of how critical thinking legitimates itself through different bodies and how it gets constituted through structures of power. It introduces the theoretical provocations of Karen Barad and Sara Ahmed and how the connections and intellectual disagreements in their work offer generative potential for thinking about criticality. I explain how Ahmed's feminist theorisations (1998, 2004, 2010b, 2012, 2015) are powerful for thinking through what behaviours, values and gestures become routinised as critical thinking, how boundaries between legitimate/illegitimate critical bodies get produced through discourses and how practices of critical thinking become affectively invested as happy objects. I then describe how Barad's feminist agential realism (2004, 2007, 2010, 2012a, 2012b), particularly her concept of intra-action, allows me to explore critical thinking as an *entangled* socio-material-discursive knowledge practice.

Following this, [Chapter 5](#) *A Framework for Researching Critical Thinking* describes the methodology used in the thesis, including the decision to focus on first-year students in a specific institution from two different disciplinary cohorts. It also explains the use of semi-structured interviews, loosely structured and participantish observation and a focus group - and the onto-epistemological and ethical challenges raised by data collection and analysis.

[Chapter 6](#) *Critical thinking for what? About what?* is the first of four analysis chapters. It describes how the majority of students subscribed to more than one definition of critical thinking concurrently and how their engagements shifted and clashed, particularly in relation to the supposed incongruity between notions of critical thinking as a technology of assessment and critical thinking as a political/social responsibility. I argue, using Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action (defined in [Section 4.3](#)), that critical thinking should be understood as an entanglement of social, material and discursive knowledge practices in higher education, from which students are inseparable.

[Chapter 7](#) *We don't have anything critical to say, we really liked it* analyses critical thinking's affective entanglements. In the data, students described their anxieties about critique 'spilling' from the textual to the social and personal and their worries about the social and emotional consequences of embodying specific forms of 'negative' criticality. They also spoke about their hopes and desires invested in being critical and its association with personal and social transformation. Using Barad's (2007) work on the entanglement of the socio-material-discursive (defined in [Section 4.3](#)) and Ahmed's (2010b) theorisation of 'the feminist killjoy' (defined in [Section 4.2](#)), I explore how first-year students negotiate these complex affects in *becoming* a critical thinker.

[Chapter 8](#) *Being Critical, Doing Critical* unpacks the disembodied notion of critical beings (Barnett, 1997) and uses Barad and Ahmed's feminist theorisations to ask *who* occupies a 'legitimate' critical body in higher education and *how* such bodies are re-shaped by dominant discourses about power, authority and legitimacy. It specifically considers the role of maturity, subject discipline and gender to argue that those positioned as 'Others' in higher education potentially have more work to do to become recognised as critical thinkers compared to those traditionally 'at home' in the academy.

[Chapter 9](#) *Dead, Dumbed Down or Discontented* looks at the shifting value of critical thinking in the neoliberal academy and the consequences of the rise of both technologised and psychologised approaches to critical learning. It argues that neoliberal higher education produces an increasingly narrow and economistic vocabulary for talking about education's value/values and a limited grammar for understanding the contextual and contingent nature of criticality - and that this shift has produced considerable philosophical and political consequences for students' critical thinking.

[Chapter 10](#) summarises my intellectual contribution to critical thinking research and briefly proposes suggestions for how critical thinking might be re-considered pedagogically. This chapter also restates the importance of *troubling* critical thinking (and

other taken for granted pedagogical concepts in higher education) and the significance and exploratory power of using critical, feminist sociological thinking to analyse the academic world.

1.3 RE-THINKING CRITICAL THINKING?

Pithers and Soden's (2000) literature review of critical thinking research describes how the concept has been (and is likely to continue to be) the focus of continuing theoretical attention. In view of this, what does my analysis offer? Firstly, there is a distinct lack of scholarship looking at what undergraduates think and feel about critical thinking. Turning my analysis towards students (rather than theorising critical thinking as an abstract philosophy or testing its effectiveness as a pedagogical practice) offers an original contribution to research about student learning in higher education.

Secondly, an approach informed by feminist poststructuralist (e.g. Ahmed, 2010b, Berlant, 2011) and new-materialist scholarship (e.g. Barad, 2007, Fenwick & Edwards, 2013) offers a deeper focus on the interconnections between critical thinkers and their context and towards the acts of boundary making that constitute practices of criticality and what and who they include/exclude. In this thesis, I destabilise the focus on the all-knowing, disembodied critical being and foreground the role of social and material context and embodied identity in shaping the production of critical thinkers. Rather than critical thinking representing a cognitive act by reasoned, detached bodies, I explore how it emerges both *through* the web of social, material and discursive knowledge practices that constitute critical knowledge and *with* and *through* the different bodies that enact it. Therefore, instead of understanding pedagogical practices as being fixed and stable, this approach highlights how the experience of critical thinking shifts in accordance with the social, embodied and relational contexts in which one is entangled at any particular moment. This, I argue, offers a conceptual challenge to dominant neoliberal discourses of university learning as transparent, measurable and transferrable (using critiques e.g. by Davies, 2003, Evans, 2004, Lynch, 2006).

Finally, reimagining criticality through a specifically *feminist* analysis allows me to ask a different set of questions about how critical thinking is conceptualised, embodied and performed. My theoretical analysis addresses how becoming a critical thinker is entangled within unequal gendered, classed and racialised hierarchies of knowledge production and circulation. By looking at critical thinking as an affective and bodily process (rather than simply a cognitive one) this shifts emphasis away from masculinist conceptions of the rational and knowing subject to imaginaries which pay attention to the role of the senses

in higher education pedagogies. This acts to further chip away at the binary that persists between thoughts and feelings (a gendered notion that is mapped historically to reason/masculinity and emotion/femininity) (Walkerdine, 1989). My hope is that doing theoretical work on 'difference' and critical thinking also represents an important and original contribution to literature on higher education equity.

2. THE PLACE FOR CRITICAL THINKING IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

'The interactions of people in the circularity flows, or pulses, and sometimes spasms of policy's demands are often ghosts in the machine as it seeks to assert an over-rationalistic idealistic view of the world of the university'.

(Hey & Morley, 2011, p.167)

This chapter provides a contextual framework in which to situate my analysis of critical thinking, by exploring key policy demands of higher education massification and marketisation and their resulting discursive shifts in the higher education landscape, epitomised in notions of student and staff performativity, that have come to constitute the 'neoliberal' academy. My intention, following Hey and Morley above, is to explore the effects of how policies construct, mould and reproduce the subjects of the neoliberal academy. While the focus of this study is on the UK, the pervasiveness of neoliberalism as a global phenomenon and policy discourse means that many of these features will be familiar to those working in other places, particularly Western countries such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

Neoliberalism refers to an economic philosophy that places emphasis on free-market economics, privatisation and individualisation in an increasingly globalised world. It is premised on the notion that 'human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms' in a socio-economic and political context 'characterised by strong private-property rights, free-markets and free-trade' (Harvey, 2005, p.2). Since the 1970s, this ideology has been intensified as a global political and economic discourse, such that 'it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world' (*ibid*, p.3). Indeed, Brown (2015) describes it as operating as a pernicious:

Form of reason... an understanding of the world...as nothing but markets - and an understanding of human beings as fully reducible to market actors. (para.12)

Neoliberalism therefore constitutes not just an economic framing but something which interweaves with other aspects of human activity. This can be exemplified clearly via its effects on education systems and practices.

Giroux (2002) argues that neoliberal drivers of 'commercialism, privatisation, and deregulation' have taken a stranglehold over higher education in the United Kingdom over the last few decades (p.103). Gill (2009) neatly summarises the 'neoliberal' academy as:

The importing of corporate models of management into university life; the reformulation of the very nature of education in instrumental terms connected to business and the economy; the transformation of students into consumers; and the degradation of pay and working conditions for academics, as well as the increasing casualisation [and precariousness] of employment. (p.230)

The 'takeover of higher education by the logic of the market' (*ibid*, p.230) has emerged through interrelated policy frameworks to widen access to higher education as an economic imperative and to create a higher education marketplace. This has consequences for understanding higher education's value and values and, concurrently, the purpose, significance and legibility of critical thinking.

Firstly, while neoliberalism presents itself as a common-sense discourse, its *hidden injuries* (Gill, 2009) include an obfuscation (and consequent reproduction) of inequality. Where this is particularly noticeable is in relation to the measurement of education and research quality e.g. via the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the National Student Survey (NSS). While such technologies are often posed as neutral performance indicators, they instead frequently reflect and reproduce existing inequalities. For example, Marginson and van der Wende (2007) discuss the phenomena of the global ranking of universities, stating that while it presents itself as a simplistic 'league-table' in which direct comparisons can be made, in practice it privileges Western, science-focused and research intensive institutions. Morley (2015) similarly considers how the seemingly objective notion of research 'quality' in the REF reproduces gendered *inequalities*. Moreover, Sabri (2011) states that the NSS, which aims to create data-driven intelligence about student satisfaction, instead underplays the socio-political issues that lie at the heart of education practices and policies. My thesis consequently focuses on exploring how the common-sense discourse of critical thinking as enacted in and through the neoliberal academy may similarly obscure such contingencies.

Furthermore, as an economic and political idea, neoliberalism is premised on the assumption that the market can 'replace the democratic State as the primary producer of cultural logic and value' (Lynch, 2006, p.3). Yet while a market ideology relies on the notion of free and equal market actors, the space of higher education presents specific vulnerabilities for marginalised groups in having access to higher education's premium. As [Section 2.1](#) describes, while increasing numbers of students enter higher education, it remains a privileged space. This is exemplified, not simply in access discourses, but through everyday experiences of misrecognition. For example, the rise of study-skills provision in universities (including teaching critical thinking) is often connected with massification. This acts to position those 'new' to the academy – such as mature students

and those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds – as the beneficiaries of such support. This places their capabilities as students in deficit, rather than addressing broader cultural or structural discourses and belies the legacy of historic disadvantage that has created the image of the student and the critical thinker along normative classed, racialised and gendered lines.

Yet despite research on the embodied and contingent nature of higher education experiences (e.g. Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, Crossouard, 2011), neoliberalism conceptualises individual actors as 'enterprising and competitive entrepreneurs' (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p.315), motivated by self-interest and negotiating the world and decision making through cost-benefit analysis. Neoliberalism's logic has permeated education such that:

Instead of thinking about educating citizens for the value of democracy or civilization or simply being educated people, everyone thinks now of education - and especially higher education - as simply an investment in one's own individual future as a bit of capital that wants to enhance its value, become worth more, and become capable of earning a higher income. (Brown, 2015, para.9)

In such a context, students become reconceptualised as self-invested consumers of an educational product, which they will subsequently trade as qualifications and skills in the graduate 'knowledge' economy. The creation of a higher education market will be described in [Section 2.2](#), followed by an exploration of the philosophical and pedagogical implications of this for understanding what 'value' critical thinking has to student 'consumers' in [Section 2.3](#).

Finally, the dominance of economic discourses creates a context of educational regulation and performance management for both staff and students, enacted through cultures of performativity. This is defined by Macfarlane (2014) as the circulation of:

Targets, evaluations and performance indicators connected with the measurement of the teaching and research quality of university academics... Student performativity is the mirror image of teacher performativity...Students are evaluated on the basis of how they perform at university in bodily, dispositional and emotional terms. (p.1)

Consequently, [Section 2.4](#) argues that where learning is required to be continually demonstrated and measured, this has implications for practices like critical thinking which are more abstract.

2.1 WIDENING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Participating in higher education is recognised as ‘a critical determinant of life chances’ (Naidoo & Callender, 2000, p.235). For individuals, higher education study and the accumulation of intellectual and social capitals, has been linked to benefits including higher earnings, increased employability, better health and greater life satisfaction (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013). For national governments, the university ‘product’ is marketed as a means of both promoting social mobility and supporting global economic competitiveness. Consequently, widening-participation to higher education’s premiums to previously underrepresented groups has become a key feature of UK educational policy (Hinton-Smith, 2012). However, Watson (2013) argues that widening-participation is only a social justice *imaginary* and, while often discursively positioned in relation to altruistic concerns by national governments, it is primarily economically motivated and informed by human capital theory, rather than social justice.

The move to widen access to UK higher education arose in the 1950s and 1960s after a fall in the number of school leavers post baby-boom and a need to stimulate economic recovery. This initiated a ‘casting the recruitment net wide’ (Hinton-Smith, 2012, p.2) towards previously excluded groups in order for higher education institutions to meet student recruitment targets. This corresponds to three key policy moments, adapted from David *et al.* (2008), and aligning with Trow’s (2005) theorisation of the move from *elite*, to *mass* to *universal* higher education:

1) *Moving away from Elite Higher Education*: The Robbins Report (1963) recommended the immediate expansion of universities with places ‘available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment’ (p.8). Consequently, ‘non-traditional’ groups including (initially) women, ethnic minorities, mature and working-class students entered the dominant white, able-bodied, male and middle-class world of higher education (Hinton-Smith, 2012).

2) *Moving towards Mass Higher Education*: Conservative governments of the 1980s amended the Robbins principle, making courses available ‘to all those who are able to benefit from them and who wish to do so’ (Department of Education and Science, 1985, para.3.2). It further expanded the sector by establishing different routes into higher education (including via academic qualifications, vocational qualifications and Access courses) and by implementing the 1992 *Further and Higher Education Act* which allowed 35 polytechnics to become universities (David *et al.*, 2008).

3) *Universal Higher Education*: The Dearing Report (1997) recommended further growth for the sector and prompted the Labour Government to set a bold target for 50% of all UK 18-30 year olds to have accessed higher education by 2010 (Blair, 1999). In their White Paper - *The Future of Higher Education* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) - access was reconceptualised as 'available to all those who have the potential to benefit from them, regardless of their background' (p.67) and about providing courses 'which satisfy both students and employers' (p.22). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition, which succeeded Labour in 2010, in principle stated their continued commitment to widening-participation and university expansion, emphasising the social and financial value of participation in higher education for young people (HM Government, 2011). However, Burke (2012) identifies that, despite this claimed commitment, institutions most successful in widening-participation were most vulnerable to the Coalition's 2010/11 funding cuts. She hints at a growing anxiety amongst researchers and practitioners' working with underrepresented students that widening-participation has come to an end in England. Indeed, while the current Conservative government pledged to lift the cap on undergraduate student numbers, which they argue places an arbitrary limit on who can access the benefits of higher education (The Conservative Party, 2015a), expansion no longer appears to clearly target specific underrepresented groups.

As a consequence of such policies, the numbers of students accessing universities has continued to rise steadily, moving from an elite to a universal model and representing a massification of the UK higher education system. In 1999 the total numbers of students enrolled in UK higher education courses stood at 1,856,330 of which 1,318,530 or 71% were UK undergraduates (Higher Education Statistics Agency - HESA, 2001). In 2013/14 this was 2,229,445, of which 1,533,855 or 69% were UK undergraduates (HESA, 2015a). This represents a rise of 20% of all HE enrolments and 16% of UK undergraduate enrolments over the fourteen-year period. However, as widening-participation policies are theoretically about educating members of specific nation states and encouraging people to access higher education study as undergraduates, it is worth noting that the proportion of UK undergraduates attending UK higher education institutions has dropped slightly in the period. In terms of the proportion of 18-30 year olds in higher education, the mean UK participation rate for the 2005-2009 cohorts stood at 35%, an increase of 2 percentage points (6% proportionally) since 2000-2004 (HEFCE, 2012). The most recently available data suggest a figure of 43% in 2012/13, close to the original 50% target and representing a shift towards *universal* participation.

Yet these notions of massification, while rationalised as assisting social mobility (albeit through increased economic participation), continue to reproduce existing inequalities, with the most elite students dominating the most elite institutions (Sutton Trust, 2008, Savage, 2015). Only 19% of those from the most disadvantaged areas attend university, compared with 57% from the most advantaged (HM Government, 2011). Furthermore, in 2013/14, 90% of UK students studying a first-degree were state-school educated, a rise of less than 5% since 1999 (HESA, 2001, HESA, 2015b). This is despite the fact that independent schools educate only 6.5% of the UK population, rising to 18% at aged 16 (Independent Schools Council, 2013).

Access to the most selective institutions is similarly differentiated, with elite institutions continuing to recruit those from the highest socio-economic classes. In 2013/14, the University of Cambridge (ranked number 1 in the 2016 Guardian University Guide) had only 11% of students from the lowest socio-economic classes (NS-SEC 4-7), 60% of entrants from state schools and only 4% from areas classed as low-participation neighbourhoods. At the other end of the spectrum, London Metropolitan University (ranked last but one at 118) had 53% of students from NS-SEC 4-7, 98% of entrants from state schools and 8% from low participation neighbourhoods (HESA, 2015b). Furthermore, a freedom of information request revealed that 29% of the Oxbridge colleges made no offers to black British students for the 2010/11 academic year (Lammy, 2010). All of this has little to do with educational capability. On the contrary, students educated at independent schools were 4% *less* likely to achieve a 1st or a 2:1 degree than state-school students (Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, 2010). In addition, research by Reay *et al.* (2001) has shown how class and race interrelate to affect students' decision making in ways that reproduce racialised and classed inequalities. Not only do 'non-traditional' students disproportionately access lower-status institutions but their choice making processes are markedly different from their more privileged counterparts – such as the psychological constraint of feeling like they will not 'fit' in elite institutions. Such differential access to higher education institutions reproduces structural inequality and challenges the notions of social mobility inherent in government policies.

As well as exclusions at the level of access, the neoliberal focus of widening-participation policies upon 'upskilling' underrepresented groups to compete in the knowledge economy, acts to position them in intellectual and cultural deficit. Jones and Thomas (2005) argue that the 2003 White Paper - *The Future of Higher Education* - places the emphasis on 'non-traditional' students as 'lacking' aspiration and skills, as opposed to

any onus on institutional change. This was also a criticism made of the now defunct 'AimHigher' widening-participation programme, which ran in the UK from 2004-2011 (Hinton-Smith, 2012). While the notion of individual responsibility is a key tenet of neoliberal subjectivity, the emphasis on aspiration as a crucial determinant of academic success arguably problematises the marginalised for their own exclusion. It specifically fails to recognise other material, practical and psychological barriers to accessing higher education. This was echoed in Reay *et al.* (2002)'s work with mature female students returning to learning via access courses which showed that for these 'non-traditional' students, their journeys to 'aspiring' higher education were set against a number of structural and psychological constraints.

As well as having differential access to higher education's access opportunities, these 'new' students appeared at odds with traditional understandings of student-hood, with subsequent research into their experiences proclaiming structural disadvantage and misrecognition. For example, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) describe how, for many students regarded as 'non-traditional' and targeted by widening-participation initiatives, higher education is experienced as a struggle. Furthermore, Yorke and Longden (2008) show how disadvantaged groups find it hardest to adapt to the 'rules of the game' in higher education and are more likely to have negative experiences than their peers. Indeed, 'access without support is not opportunity' (Tinto & Engstrom, 2008, p.46) and widening-participation into universities without providing institutional inclusion strategies and support for the specific needs of this increasingly diverse student body, can be judged as tokenistic. It is important to emphasise again that such feelings of exclusion are not necessarily related to intellectual ability as international evidence suggests that first-generation students, for example, do not have lower continuation or success rates than their peers (Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

Finally, there is also a sense in which these new student bodies and their success in accessing and succeeding in higher education becomes delegitimised as discourses of massification and 'dumbing-down' of higher education have emerged simultaneously. For example, the rise of study-skills provision in higher education (including teaching critical thinking) is often justified by a need to prepare the (intellectually and socially) unprepared 'masses', for the pedagogies and cultures of the academy. Haggis (2006) outlines how a common response to the challenges of massification is to focus on how to make success possible for these 'new' bodies perceived as weaker in terms of educational abilities and experiences. This is also linked to a sense in which these students get affectively positioned as emotionally needy and requiring support (Hey &

Leathwood, 2009). Indeed, such remedial approaches symbolically position 'the Other' in cultural, emotional and intellectual deficit. However, the National Audit Office (2000) found that due to changes in secondary-school curricula, particularly the prioritisation of exams over assessed coursework, the majority of students are not adequately prepared for independent learning at university, including critical thinking. Therefore, the focus should shift from 'what is wrong with this student's critical thinking?' to 'what are the features/processes/embodiments of critical thinking that prevent some students being able to succeed'? For example, [Chapter 8](#) will question how the figure of the critical thinker is constructed in relation to dominant constructions of the ideal university student as white, privileged, male and able-bodied 'an autonomous individual unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self doubt' (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p.599).

Similarly, the increased participation of women in higher education links the 'feminisation' of higher education to 'dumbing down' (Leathwood & Read, 2009). Across the globe, more women than men participate in higher education, a shift in the gender balance since 1999, and in 2013/14 women comprised of 56% of all UK students (HESA, 2014). Yet Morley (2011a) argues that:

Higher education remains gendered in terms of its values, norms, processes and employment regimes, even when women are in the majority as undergraduate students. (p.223)

While women appear to have closed the gap numerically as students in UK higher education, important gendered inequalities remain in relation to subject 'choice' and in women's relative success in the graduate labour market via both the gender pay gap and horizontal segregation. Despite this, the 'feminisation' of the academy has been greeted with alarm and a moral panic over a decline in intellectual standards (Leathwood & Read, 2009). For example, Hayes (2005) argues that the focus on the 'affective side of learning' (a highly gendered dichotomy) 'undermines hard critical thinking' (no-page). The association of the success of women (or other 'non-traditional' groups) with a reduction in the status of higher education acts to further delegitimise any numerical gains made through widening-participation policies. As Morley (2003) describes 'there is a powerful discourse of crisis, loss, damage contamination and decay in higher education' (p.5) and this acts to reinforce dominant discourses of who belongs in the academy. So while widening-participation is positioned as key to social mobility – it is constructed through socially decontextualised neoliberal notions of human capital that fail to account for how bodies deemed 'Other' do not have equal access to higher education's premiums.

2.2 HIGHER EDUCATION AS A MARKETPLACE

The move to widen participation has occurred in parallel with a move to increase the cost of university education and create a higher education marketplace in which all participants are welcome (but only if they can pay). As [Section 2.3](#) discusses, this repositions education as a private rather than a public good. Yet the notion of a 'meritocratic' free-market also acts to conceal structural inequalities that, as detailed above, continue to see the most advantaged students take the majority of overall university places and heavily dominate 'top' universities. Means tested tuition-fees of a maximum of £1,000 per year to be paid upfront, were first introduced in the UK following the publication of Dearing (1997). The cost rose again after the 2004 *Higher Education Act* introduced variable tuition-fees up to a cap of £3,000, which would be repaid once the graduate earned above £15,000 per year. This was enforced in England and Northern Ireland for students starting their undergraduate studies from 2006/7 and in Wales in 2007/8. To take account of inflation, in 2009/10 the cap rose to £3,225 a year. Further fee increases emerged from the 2010 Browne Review into university funding. This recommended lifting the cap on tuition-fees to a maximum of £9,000 per-annum and raising the amount a graduate would need to earn before repayment to £21,000 per-annum (Browne, 2010).

This tuition-fee increase was part of a drive for increased marketisation of higher education with students conceptualised as informed 'consumers' with financial bargaining power (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011). It occurred alongside the UK Coalition government's campaign to lower the economic deficit via a series of austerity measures directly aimed at reducing the cost of the public sector through cuts and privatisation measures. At the time of writing, the current Conservative government have made little legislative progress on higher education but their 2015 manifesto committed them to keeping the 2010 fee levels and repayment system (The Conservative Party, 2015a). However their the pledge to 'ensure the continuing success and stability of the reforms' (p.35) suggests further fee rises are likely (Universities UK, 2015). Indeed, the July 2015 budget pledged to lift the £9,000 tuition-fee cap in line with inflation, for institutions that can demonstrate high quality teaching, regulated through the introduction of a Teaching Excellence Framework (The Conservative Party, 2015b). Responses to the latter, proposed as part of a higher education Green Paper (HM Government, 2015), have been met with some negative responses from student and staff groups. For example, the NUS (2015) vehemently opposes further fee rises and rejects

the notion of students as consumers and UCU (2015) see further marketisation and privatisation of universities as damaging, rather than improving, quality.

These concerns are reflected by Holmwood (2014) who argues that the emergence of the neoliberal higher education marketplace has dismantled the Robbins' notion of public education as a social right, with detrimental effects on both quality and equity. For example, shifting the financial costs of university education onto the students subordinates higher education to the market. This has the paradoxical consequence that:

Far from a role in the amelioration of social inequality, universities are now asked to participate actively in the widening inequalities associated with a neoliberal global market order. (p.62)

Furthermore, private investment has prompted an interest in deriving profit from education activities, 'with little evidence of any broader advantage, either in terms of efficiency or of quality' (*ibid*, p.72). Holmwood (2012) describes these shifts as a naïve experiment, which fundamentally undermines the philosophy of the 'public' university. Similarly, McGettigan (2013) states that the marketisation of higher education is a political 'gamble', whereby the government is shifting resources to the most selective institutions while leaving others open to commercial pressures, at an unprecedented pace of change and without being transparent about its reasoning or evidence base. Like Holmwood, he argues that:

An experiment is being conducted on English universities - one that is not controlled and in the absence of any compelling evidence for change threatens an internationally admired and efficient system. (p.2)

Concerns about the economic implications of the withdrawal of public funds for universities have also been raised by Collini (2013) who describes how private capital providers will be increasingly involved in making a profit out of higher education. He predicts that future historians will be baffled by the decision to make public institutions (which have strong international reputations and have been positive forces for social cohesion) resemble businesses (which have a much more mixed record, frequently recording gigantic losses).

The creation of a higher education market is not only fiscally troubling but has philosophical and pedagogical consequences for higher education's value and values. Consequently, while Brown (2011) accepts the reality of some degree of market competition, he calls for greater balance of emphasis between private and public purposes of higher education, arguing that a 'healthy' system:

Should be valued *both* for its intrinsic qualities in creating, conserving and disseminating knowledge and for its extrinsic qualities in serving broader economic, social and cultural goals. (p.4)

2.3 HIGHER EDUCATION AS A 'VALUABLE' CONSUMER PRODUCT

The Browne Review (2010) strongly argued higher education's contribution to economic growth and to the human capital of individuals - repositioning education as consumer product and a private, rather than a public, good. The cognate notion of students as savvy consumers of a university's products was also emphasised in the Coalition's policy that followed whereby:

A good student is not simply a consumer of other people's knowledge, but will actively draw on all the resources that a good university or college can offer to learn as much as they can. (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011, p.11)

Notions of 'choice' are attractive and compel universities to publish information on graduate employment rates and numbers of contact hours - factors that are likely to have an impact on a potential students' educational experience and employment trajectory. At the same time, such notions of students as active, rational choice agents or consumers arguably offers an ineffective analogy to conceptualise the intellectual and personal rewards of higher study as well as the broader societal and cultural benefits of having an educated population.

Indeed, the consumer model has been described as having potentially damaging pedagogical consequences because education is not a straightforward transaction of capital for services and involves considerable input from students. Where entitled student customers demand a return on their investment, this potentially changes the nature of the pedagogical relationship. Taken to its analogical limits, academics get dominantly positioned as knowledge service providers, rather than critical facilitators and students' focus is predominantly on instrumental credit accumulation, rather than broader personal, political or social development. While such an argument is a little too simplistic, the potential impact of 'consumer' ideology has been critically discussed in the literature. For example, Naidoo *et al.* (2011) argue that consumerism promotes passive and instrumental learning among students who learn to 'game the system' (p.1152). This has particular consequences for critical learning, which arguably involves challenge to preconceived ideas and dealing with complex notions and cannot be easily transmitted, received or measured. Collini (2013) agrees that the quantitative fallacy of reducing all 'activity to a common managerial metric' is being increasingly applied to 'activities of thinking and understanding' with problematic, reductive consequences (para.45).

Williams (2013) also describes how higher education has become disconnected from a moral or intellectual vision of education as a public good. For example, as Brown (2015) describes, student 'self-investors' are required to think about their educational experiences only in terms of:

How do I take a set of possible experiences or possibilities and use them to enhance my human capital, to enhance its present value and its possible future value? (para.22)

The philosophical consequences of the shift away from the publically funded towards the privatised university have been hotly debated by a number of prominent anti-marketisation campaigns. The *Council for the Defence of British Universities* (2012) a lobby group of senior academics and politicians argue that the privatisation of higher education shifts crucial emphasis away from the important public role of education in developing knowledge and understanding and enhancing the intellectual and material quality of life. Similarly, the *Campaign for the Public University*, a group of academics and students, argue that the notion of education as a public good is essential for cultivating democracy and citizenship. Their manifesto states that government policy fails to consider higher education's crucial contribution to the public sphere and to fostering the capability for full participation in society (Campaign for the Public University, no date). These concerns with the 'thinning-out' of the civic and social purpose of higher education have also been raised by students who have also campaigned against privatisation, including in my own institution in 2012 and 2013, which saw students occupy buildings in protest against the conceptualisation of the university as a business, rather than as an educational community (Danvers & Gagnon, 2014).

As well as consumerism prompting questions about the pedagogical and philosophical consequences of a higher education market, tuition-fee raises force a reconsideration of the financial value of higher education. A 2007 report on graduate earnings projected that a graduate from Medicine and Dentistry will earn £340,000 extra over their lifetime than a non-graduate, compared with £51,549 for the Humanities and £34,949 for the Arts (Universities UK, 2007). With the fee structure as it stands, graduates will leave with approximately £21,000 in fee debt alone. If we take into account living expenses, this suggests that some Arts and Humanities degrees now have a negative financial return. This, coupled with the withdrawal of public subsidy for the Arts and Humanities following the Browne Report (2010), puts these subjects at considerable risk in terms of conceptualising 'value'. And yet, in a letter to the Observer, a number of vice-chancellors and heads of Arts institutions argue that these subjects are important precisely *because*

they promote criticality, by teaching students ‘to challenge ideas’ (Crossick *et al.*, 2010, no-page).

However, framing the debate in terms of a graduate premium assumes a neutral and fair concept of work, which distorts the reality of the labour market, in particular the gender pay gap, where currently women earn 19% less than men (The Fawcett Society, 2015). Indeed, Morley (2007) emphasises how the lack of clarity around employability ‘provides ideal preconditions for the reproduction of elitism and inequalities’ in the world of work (p.194). Brown and Tannock (2009) are similarly critical of the graduate premium discourse, questioning both whether higher education *does* lead to such economic reward and also whether it *should* define itself through such a promise. Therefore the influence of neoliberal market forces through the introduction of higher fees and with it the accompanying ‘student as consumer’ discourse, has implications for re-considering the value of a higher education where the end ‘product’ does not have equal value for its customers, as well as wiping the imaginary clean of other ways to conceptualise the non-financial value higher education has for students and wider society.

2.4 PERFORMATIVITY IN THE NEOLIBERAL ACADEMY

The dominance of neoliberal logics of both individualisation and the market also appears in higher education’s pedagogies and practices through notions of performativity. Performativity relates to the measurement, via targets and performance indicators, of teaching and learning quality in higher education. It is about demonstrating the tangible value of educational products as positional goods in the knowledge economy and stems from the rise of managerialist systems, where professional life is surveyed and regulated by external auditors. In such a context, the neoliberal subject is involved in a subjectification process *par excellence*. For example, an individual’s sense of value becomes displaced from professional self-conduct through the adherence to an external gaze of the market to determine what counts. Yet individuals are simultaneously required to habitually shape themselves as productive and valuable (Davies, 2003). In such a context, academics and students are continually remaking themselves against performance indicators that continually shift. This puts the ‘perform’ in performativity, with energies spent on *reporting* work rather than *doing* it (Ball, 2012).

Ball (2012) identifies two main impacts of performativity for university faculty. Firstly, academics may orient towards pedagogical activities with immediate measurable value such as documenting professional activity and delivering ‘safe’ teaching via pre-specified

content, which can be assessed conventionally. This is at the expense of activities that contribute more tangibly towards students' social, emotional or moral development such as developing innovative and inclusive teaching and assessment or working closely with students (Naidoo *et al.*, 2011). Secondly, where scholarly practices become measurable, they become decontextualised performances of 'knowledge' rather than contextualised processes of 'learning'. This focus on product over process is exemplified in the rise of MOOCs, which package academic knowledge into potentially highly marketable products.

Yet, as Macfarlane (2014) discusses, while academic performativity is judged as an unwarranted assault on professionalism, student performativity is often described unproblematically, as a sign of learning or engagement. Student performativity can be conceptualised as the need to continually demonstrate educational engagement in ways that can be counted. For example, a student's 'performance' at university is often only understood as successful in relation to completion of formal assessments towards the achievement of a degree. Indeed, discourses of assessment permeate the everyday worlds of the higher education classroom, in ways that attempt to instrumentalise social and emotional development e.g. assessing classroom participation or personal reflection. This has been critiqued by David and Clegg (2008) who argue that, while emotion work and personalisation has become incorporated into pedagogical discourse, it is built on an assumed model of an impersonal and disembodied subject, obscuring important feminist concerns with inequality and power. Furthermore, focusing on the doctoral viva, Crossouard (2011) argues that conceptualising assessment as a technology or learning as a set of processes obscures its intensely affective, embodied and subjective dimensions. Similarly, in relation to peer assessment in schools Crossouard (2012) states that, rather than being a purely cognitive process, learning is always 'embodied, relational and affectively charged' (p.745). For example, she describes how, despite teachers echoing positive, neutralised discourses of collaboration and community, social class and gender were highly influential in shaping pupils' assessment behaviours in the context of peer group work.

The work of Crossouard and others (e.g. David & Clegg, 2008, Leathwood & O'Connell, 2011, Stevenson & Clegg, 2012) in emphasising the notion of learning as complex, contingent and embodied acts to challenge the notions of students as instrumental consumers of knowledge who unproblematically collect higher education's rewards through successful assessment performances. My thesis is intended to build on this tradition of feminist pedagogical critique to explore notions of embodiment, contingency and complexity specifically in relation to critical thinking.

2.5 CONCLUSION - CRITICAL THINKING'S PLACE

The brief context of contemporary higher education policy I have outlined above is one of an increasingly diverse student population, raised (and potentially rising) tuition-fees and new questions about the financial and intellectual value of a degree. However, while the contexts of marketisation, massification and performativity described above position critical thinking and neoliberalism as analogous, it is a simple story to reify neoliberalism as an amorphous 'enemy' both to higher education and to critical thinking. Neoliberalism's affects cannot always be neatly teased apart from other behaviours and trends within higher education, nor can its products be understood as universally bad news.

For example, the encouragement of academic staff to audio record lectures could be interpreted as supporting the marketisation of higher education where lecturers' intellectual property can be captured and sold (UCU, 2012). This is further complicated by the way neoliberalism assigns itself with common-sense forms of reason (Brown, 2015) where engaging with practices such as lecture-capture becomes positioned as characteristic of the dynamic and supportive academic (who is not given any more time to develop such technological literacies). Such neoliberal technologies act to get under the skin by being affectively invested as happy objects (Ahmed, 2010). Those who critique their use can easily be positioned as killjoys - not simply against the technologies themselves - but against the 'good sense' they represent. And yet lecture-capture could also be understood as a product of democratisation via open access or educational inclusion, where, for example, students with disabilities can use such recordings to support their note taking and information processing (Fuller *et al.*, 2004). Or as part of educational technologies that 'flip' the classroom, orientating away from the lecture as knowledge delivery, to information being delivered online in advance, with lecture time used for critical discussion. Inclusive curricula and their accompanying educational technologies, could be attempts to move away from the intellectual privilege epitomised in the idea of the 'sage on the stage' to refocus pedagogies on the needs of diverse student communities. Indeed, many critiques of the neoliberal university fail to address how that a pre-neoliberal golden age, was golden only for an elite few and where hierarchical and patriarchal pedagogical practices dominated (Morley, 2012).

Yet inclusion discourses have been described as surface interpretations that overshadow the complexities of forms of inequality in the neoliberal academy. For example Ahmed (2012) argues about the 'non-performativity' of diversity policies whereby educational

practices become tools to 'do' diversity, without accompanying systemic challenges to how the academy is orientated towards the needs of the dominant group. Such outcomes are therefore not necessarily good/bad or purely 'neoliberal' effects. Neoliberalism and its effects are entangled such that understanding the politics of lecture-capture, for example, requires a close reading that attempts to account for such complexities. In particular, looking at our affective investments in such practices – where they are associated with good/natural or bad/killjoy ways of being – is important in recognising how neoliberalism gets under the skin.

Similarly, returning to critical thinking and the intersecting ways it is shaped by neoliberalism, I am drawn back to earlier experiences working with students in learning development. Firstly, when I had a stressed, busy student in front of me with a half-completed essay who was struggling to get her/his head around critical thinking, it felt more useful to discuss critical thinking in instrumental terms. I often suggested returning to the assessment learning outcomes and attempting to match phrases such as 'discuss critically' with straightforward doable tasks e.g. read a critique of the main author you are using. While I was critical of their reductive nature, the educational common-sense language of learning outcomes allows academic knowledge to be broken down into communicable sections in this way, which requires thinking about, or at least giving lip-service to, students and their learning. Secondly, when, as part of an widening-participation initiative, I had to describe the virtues of higher education to a group of disadvantaged students who would be the first cohort of students paying the increased fees of £9,000 a year, I did construct critical thinking as a measurable 'value'. Partly this was because I was painfully aware that higher education might not necessarily have financial value, particularly for those without the social and cultural capitals required to succeed in the higher levels of the graduate labour market. Perhaps I was preforming the neoliberal discourse because I was entangled within the complex knowledge practices that constituted higher education and critical thinking? Perhaps I failed to imagine alternative solutions? And yet, at times, it did not all feel like the *wrong* thing to do, but the most pragmatic, linking to my earlier observation of the values of neoliberalism masquerading as common-sense.

Therefore, while it is important to address that the processes of neoliberal practices getting under the skin and becoming 'good sense' is not neutral, it is also important to emphasise that logics of rationality, marketisation and performativity are not unanimously bad things either. However, when they become the only or the dominant ideologies constructing higher education's pedagogies and practices, they act to position

students and their critical thinking in very limited ways. This claim is neatly summarised by Hey and Morley (2011):

Our students and their studying, our lives and their lives, are entwined in deep commitments that cannot be captured by thin notions of the 'economical man' which seem to haunt the imaginary of the policy mandarins. It is not that students, or indeed ourselves, would wish away 'employability', nor that we lack 'aspirations' or are unconcerned about 'excellence', but the... desires and pleasures of the work we all do... [have] a different order of importance. (pp.170-1)

What follows next is an analysis of the received literature on critical thinking in higher education.

3. THINKING ABOUT CRITICAL THINKING

'Ideas are communally wrought, not individually owned.'

(Mohanty, 2003a, p.1)

Critical thinking is a diverse set of knowledge practices involving in-depth questioning and academic debate that have come to characterise the values and value of university graduates. Whilst deeply embedded in the institutional meta-language of teaching and learning in higher education, this seemingly benign and transparent intellectual value has multiple meanings and enactments (Moore, 2011b). Consequently, how to *define* critical thinking has been hotly debated in the research literature, as has its significance to 'higher' learning and how best to foster and test critical behaviours amongst students. Indeed, thinking about critical thinking is not new. Pithers and Soden's (2000) review of research into critical thinking in higher education concludes that the concept has been (and is likely to continue to be) the focus of continuing theoretical attention, prompted by attempts to better understand how to engage students in practices of criticality. This has led to, as Candy (1991) describes, 'an almost overwhelming' mass of critical thinking literature which is both 'confused and confusing' (p.329).

Such complexity is perhaps a consequence of terminology (with critical thinking often used interchangeably with terms such as critical reflection, deep thinking and criticality) as well as the diversity of disciplinary approaches to the topic, from psychological research into cognitive development (e.g. Kuhn, 1991) to educational philosophies about developing critical pedagogies (e.g. Freire & Ramos, 1996, Giroux, 2003, hooks, 2009). This chapter unpacks the concept of critical thinking, focusing on its emergence, scope and significance to students in higher education. However I recognise, with Mohanty (2003) above, that knowledge practices can rarely be neatly conceptualised or attributed to a few individual thinkers, but come into being through multiple processes of collective thinking and pedagogic practices. Thus due to the multiplicity of approaches, I do not claim to capture critical thinking's totality but instead account for key patterns of interpretation in the received literature. While the initial literature review used the search terms 'critical thinking' and 'higher education' on the Taylor and Francis, JSTOR and Science Direct databases, references subsequently branched off (e.g. to philosophical discussions about the nature of critical reasoning and to studies testing students' critical thinking abilities), with the literature review continually evolving during thesis writing.

[Section 3.1](#) outlines the main different definitions of critical thinking discussed in the literature. This includes critical thinking as rationality, as a skill, as reflection, as a political/social commitment, as well as debates over whether it should be conceptualised as a skill, competency or both. While a *correct* definition does not exist, I agree with Bailin *et al.* (1999) that this does not follow that ‘all conceptions of critical thinking are equally good or defensible’ (p.286). In particular, I argue that individualised, decontextualised, rationalist or skills approaches to critical thinking obscure the complex and contingent nature of higher education learning. [Section 3.2](#) then explores key debates about critical thinking - including the role of emotion in thought processes, the extent to which critical thinking can be understood as a social practice; critical thinking’s reliance on culturally specific discourses and the ways it is shaped by gender, class and race. [Section 3.3](#) focuses on critical thinking as enacted through the pedagogies and practices of higher education – especially focusing on studies that seek to test students’ critical faculties. I then consider what makes an effective pedagogic intervention for developing critical thinking and outline the evidence for whether this is better developed within the disciplines as opposed to through more generic approaches. I also make reference to a small set of studies close to my research design, which specifically consider students’ experiences of critical thinking – and indicate how my research advances this project further. [Section 3.4](#) summarises the received thinking about critical thinking and details the original perspective offered by my thesis. Specifically, I argue that a student-focused approach informed by feminist new-materialist and poststructuralist feminist scholarship allows a deeper focus on the interconnections between critical thinkers and their context and towards the acts of boundary making that constitute practices of criticality and *what* and *who* they include/exclude.

3.1 MULTIPLE, SHIFTING CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF CRITICAL THINKING

The question of what critical thinking *is* (and consequently what it should be *for*) dominates the research literature. This is prompted by a desire to understand it conceptually in order to make use of it theoretically and pedagogically. Moore (2011b) interviewed seventeen academic staff from a range of disciplines and found the following definitions of critical thinking as:

- 1) making judgements
- 2) a provisional view of knowledge
- 3) lateral thinking leading to originality
- 4) careful and sensitive readings of text
- 5) rationality
- 6) an ethical/activist stance

7) self-reflexivity

He argues that, although disparate between subject areas, university academics have clearly developed understandings of what critical thinking is, which they subsequently articulate to their students. While it is simplistic to assume that the transfer of knowledge from academic to student minds happens seamlessly, Moore's definitions are useful in reflecting key themes in the literature. These include - research that differently aligns critical thinking as rational problem solving, as a tangible, transferrable skill, an internal process of self-reflection or an attitude of political and social critique.

3.1.1 RATIONALITY

An early definition of critical thinking, stretching back to the ancient Greeks and the study of logic and rhetoric, is of reason and rationality. This places the construction and methodical evaluation of arguments at the centre of thinking and is informed by Socratic questioning - a theory of formal logic and a pedagogic style based on dialogue - with the purpose of interrogating knowledge for statements about truth (Paul & Elder, 1998, Golding, 2011). Notions of critical thinking as rationality are also influenced by later histories of post-enlightenment thinking and the promotion of scientific thought, scepticism and intellectual exchange (as to opposed to religion or superstition). For example, enlightenment theorist Kant (1784) describes thinking for oneself as essential for freedom:

The officer says: Do not argue but drill! The tax official: Do not argue but pay! The clergyman: Do not argue but believe... everywhere there are restrictions on freedom...But the *public* use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among human beings. (para.6)

These historical links between reason and critical thinking put the rational subject at the centre of critical thought and emphasise criticality's function for both scientific knowing and civic participation. This understanding is influential in Psychology and Philosophy where the intellectual workings of the mind are seen as primarily responsible for critical thinking. Accordingly, the American Philosophical Association (1990) define critical thinking as a 'tool of enquiry' for 'purposeful, self-regulatory judgement' (p.2). Paul and Elder (2006) take a similar, enquiry-based stance, to 'systematically cultivate excellence in thought' through applying intellectual standards (e.g. clarity, fairness) to elements of reasoning (e.g. questions, assumptions) in order to develop intellectual traits (e.g. confidence in reasoning, integrity) (p.4). In this sense, knowledge goes through a reasoned/rational negotiation for logical supremacy. For example, Ennis (1987) defines critical thinking as 'reasonable reflective thinking...focused on deciding what to believe

or do' (p.10), while Siegel (1988) states critical thinking is 'the educational cognate' of rationality (p.32).

The definition of critical thinking as reasoned/rational enquiry allows for critical thinking to be taught and learnt because what it *is* and how it is *done* can be clearly exemplified. For example, Paul and Elder are directors of the *Centre for Critical Thinking* at the University of California, which runs workshops on critical thinking instruction (Centre for Critical Thinking, 2011). In reviewing Paul and Elder's model for critical thinking and its use within nursing education, Sullivan (2012) concludes that it constitutes an:

Easily applied, practical model that can be used in any discipline and in any situation to help students reason more effectively. (p.326)

In the UK, this rationalist pedagogy heavily informs the A-Level critical thinking curriculum with modules on 'Beliefs, Claims and Arguments' and 'Reasoning and Decision Making' (AQA, 2012). However, while the definition has some useful features e.g. the focus on weighing up evidence and being clear and precise in the construction of arguments, it is premised on the idea that objective truth will be evident once these judgements have occurred. Here, critical thinking is infused with enlightenment ideas about the 'truth', which obscures some of the epistemological challenges relating to both knowledge and truth raised by feminist poststructuralist and new-materialist thinking (to be examined in [Chapter 5](#)). For example, Dunne (2015) argues that rationalist approaches fail to consider the conditions and limits of rationality, specifically its temporality in that our beliefs and actions are often incomplete and unverifiable. Yet Bailin and Siegel (2003) counter that the nature of rational enquiry means it is always in flux and consequently can be self-correcting, leaving space for margins of error and the unknown. They also claim that rationalist approaches are not simply linear and reductive but can be generative and imaginative (p.186).

Despite such claims, these rational/reasoned approaches share a rather disembodied model of the thinker as author of 'his' own critique. Consequently, critical thinking becomes a decontextualised and individualised act of 'reasoned' bodies, rather than a practice embedded in the contexts and relations in which it takes place. Furthermore, because reasoned critical thinking is about following a set of linear strategies to apply to a given problem, Moon (2012) suggests this could potentially be at odds with the idea of critical thinking as a challenge to the status quo. Indeed, it is fundamentally a depoliticised form of critical thinking which dissociates the thinker from the context in

which thinking takes place and thus to any moral or political direction for thought, reducing understandings of critical thinking to simplistic cognitive processes.

3.1.2 SKILL

A further dominant conception of critical thinking is as a distinct skill or skillset, an idea heavily informed by neoliberal desires to equip students with skills for succeeding in the graduate labour market. For example, Dearing (1997) formally introduced the idea that graduates should leave higher education possessing key-skills, apart from their subject specific knowledge, including communication, numeracy, information technology and learning how to learn (section 9.17). The latter is said to include both creative thinking and critical analysis (sections 8.3, 9.14, 9.53). These key-skills were seen as integral to creating a learning society and knowledge economy, where intellectual skills were valued and where higher education was recognised for its ability to enhance society's via 'respect for knowledge and the search for truth' (section 8). Such discourses were similarly present in the Browne Review (2010) which aligns graduates possessing skills of 'generating ideas, safeguarding knowledge and inspiring creativity' (p.14) as crucial for the state's economic success. While these policies do not define what critical thinking *is*, their understanding of skill is one that is economically driven, mechanistic and measurable.

Discourses of critical thinking as a skill also proliferate in research and pedagogic literature - from theories of criticality (e.g. Halpern, 2003), study-skills guides (e.g. Fisher, 2001, Cottrell, 2011) and within higher education pedagogies (e.g. Leicester, 2010). Such skills literature often groups critical thinking with a range of other 'soft' skills deemed essential for university study e.g. academic writing, note-making and presentation skills. In a similar way to reason/rationality approaches, skills discourses have had considerable pedagogical influence - spawning an industry of 'how to' guides.¹ The processes described in these texts are often highly instrumental; to think criticality you must follow a sequence or apply a set of questions to a given argument or assess evidence based on a given a set of criteria (Fisher, 2001). Here critical thinking becomes a *technology* - akin to a piece of software to be utilised, rather than a specific ideology. However, the skills approach does not just look at processes. For example, Cottrell (2011) provides a comprehensive guide to critical thinking and as well as focusing on the

¹ A search on Amazon for 'Critical Thinking' revealed over 50 'how-to' guides for students [25.11.12] and a search on the Sussex Library catalogue showed 17.

'how to', she also looks at the personal components of what makes a critical thinker, including the need to have an open mind.

Yet the terminology of skill is problematic, as it assumes something tangible, transferrable and measurable, whereas in practice, the acquisition of skills is complex and contextualised. Wingate (2006) argues that the term 'study-skills' is misleading and counterproductive to learning. For example, the prevalence of bolt-on skills provision in universities divorces study-skills from subject content and knowledge and the complexity of academic practices such as essay writing is obscured through discourses of skills as learning a fixed and discrete set of techniques. Indeed, skills development is not a neutral knowledge exchange and is influenced by the characteristics of the student, the programme of study and the institution, with Lauder (2009) describing how skills can act as positional goods subject to inflation and competition between different groups. For example, a middle-class student studying at Cambridge is likely to leave with a different 'skills' portfolio than a working-class student studying at London Metropolitan University. Furthermore discourses of idealised graduate 'soft' communication and interpersonal skills are highly gendered (soft/hard) and devoid of understanding of the social capital informing dominant communication styles (Morley *et al.*, 2006). While the skills discourse has immense value for helping teaching staff and students engage with the concept – it does not address some of the wider questions of the relative value of these positional goods in a social world that differentiates opportunity on the lines of class, gender, race and culture. Furthermore, conceptualising the 'value' of university knowledge in relation to these definitive outcomes is reductive and fails to recognise how education has the potential to teach wider dispositions that are not easily evidenced. For example, Ball (1995) argues that attempts to taxonomise and reduce teacher and school 'effectiveness' to a set of neutral, measurable concepts excluded both the contextual and contingent nature of educational interventions as well as obscuring how 'effectiveness' discourses constitute a specific educational ideology.

However, as someone who has taught, researched and been part of national steering groups for the learning development community, the notion of skills is hotly contested (Hartley *et al.*, 2010). While my previous department was named 'Academic Skills' and I was an 'Academic Skills Manager', departmental staff were uncomfortable with that terminology, preferring the more socially located 'learning development'. Yet while in our teaching practice we recognised that learning to write academically or think critically was embodied and contextual and taught under these philosophies, we were also pragmatic that the label 'study-skills' was one that was recognisable to both

academics and students. Furthermore, it became a label under which to enact change because university managers seemed to like the fact it seemed tangible, measurable and useful, themes examined in relation to the neoliberal academy in Chapters 2 and 9. Thus while the dominance of skills talk is significant, understandings of it are diverse within the sector and it is important not to set the debate in opposition to a stagnant or unified perspective.

3.1.3 CRITICAL REFLECTION

A trait often associated with critical thinking is the ability for students to be reflective of their attitudes towards knowledge and learning. This highlights a pedagogical context in which students are encouraged to 'reflect on their own learning and achievement, and to plan for their own personal educational and career development' through personal development portfolios and reflective logs (QAA, 2001, p.2). In some of the literature (e.g. Phillips & Bond, 2004), reflection and critical thinking are used interchangeably to denote processes of deep thinking about knowledge and the world in relation to personal experience. Furthermore, a prominent theorist of critical thinking, Dewey (1933) describes four criteria essential for reflective, deep and critical thinking. Firstly, it requires recognising the connection between others, experiences and ideas in order for meaning making to occur. Secondly, such thinking is diligent and systematic and employs scientific rigour. Thirdly, it takes place in interaction with others rather than in isolation and finally, it is put to work with the aim of personal and social betterment. Yet the pedagogical emphasis is often on critical thinking as introspective self-reflection, rather than Dewey's idea of thinking as 'interaction'. This focus on introspection is potentially influenced by neoliberalism's culture of the individual and narrows the debate by putting the focus on individuals to develop criticality about themselves rather than criticality about anything external (such as the *purpose* of tasks like the reflective portfolio).

As well as exploring the relationship between criticality and reflection, research on reflection raises interesting questions for thinking about thinking. For example, simplistic understandings of reflection assume that experiences and personal characteristics can be reflected upon scientifically or objectively – as a cognitive act divorced from things such as feelings and context. Indeed, Clegg (2004) discusses how the move in higher education to produce 'autonomous learners orientated towards future employment' (p.287) has resulted in an under-theorising of the epistemological basis of words such as reflection. She argues that reflection is being advocated as a universal practice of thinking and action, which does not take into account social location

or identity. Indeed, Stevenson and Clegg (2012), in their study of reflection amongst mature learners, found a complexity in self-reflection that evades simplistic understandings of past, future and the self. Students, according to Clegg, mimic reflection rather than confront the difficulties underlying reflection itself. Potentially students also might be *performing* critical thinking because they do not experience it as a simplistic technique but find it more problematic, a question further explored in [Chapter 9](#).

3.1.4 CRITICAL CITIZENS

Dewey's (1933) concern for thinking to be directed towards both individual and social benefit positions critical thinking as an embodied form of social critique or citizenship. Similarly, Barnett (1997) conceptualises three levels of criticality – critical reason, critical self-reflection and critical reflection on the world leading to critical action, the latter of which he sees as most crucial. He argues that critical thinking should be rethought as critical *being* and that this embodied understanding should remain at the heart of Western higher education. Following this, critical thinking becomes conceptualised not just as a cognitive, individualised process but also a social practice and a form of social action. These notions are also articulated by critical and feminist pedagogues with Freire's (1996) work seeing the purpose of education as stimulating critical consciousness or *conscientização* amongst students to emancipate them from intellectual and physical servitude. Theory and praxis are similarly intertwined for hooks (2009) who describes educating for freedom to develop in critical learners a sense of exhilaration and emancipation. These approaches appear to inspire my favourite definition of critical thinking as:

A matter of flushing out thought (which animates everyday behaviour) and trying to change it; to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed; to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such...As soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible. (Foucault, 1988, pp.154-55)

This is not about following rational processes or applying skills (although it could include them, such as the questioning of evidence) but a transformed way of *seeing* and *being* in the world – as critical beings. It is important to add, however, that notions of critical beings as undifferentiated bodies, requires further analysis of *who* these beings are and *how* they came to be positioned as critical voices. For example, Fricker (2003) discusses how certain historically and socially marginalised bodies suffer epistemic injustice by being denied the right to think, speak and be heard as 'critical'. The notion of a normative critical being will be scrutinised further in [Chapter 8](#) by exploring how students

characterised as 'Other' in higher education (such as mature females) conceptualise their access to becoming a critical body and the differential desires and fears of embodying notions of critical citizenship.

Staeheli *et al.* (2013) also describe how the relationship between higher education and the developing of critical citizenship is increasingly contested due to neoliberal concerns for educating for employment, rather than for participation in the public realm. However, they state that universities remain sites where:

Young people often become politicised and begin to question the values and norms imparted by their parents, explore new ideas, and use their critical thinking skills to challenge, rather than reproduce their communities. (p.92)

Critical thinking thus becomes about challenge and questioning the *status quo* in ways that are often, but not always, politically motivated and counter-hegemonic. This definition is also importantly about how critical beings use their critical faculties as citizens to transform their communities, as well as their individual lives and experiences. Rowland (2003) also describes the crucial link between higher education and the central role of students' critical abilities in developing democratic citizenship. However, he argues that what it means to be a critical citizen emerges through specific socio-political contexts. Using interviews with university lecturers working in Russia, South Africa and Britain, he explores how national context shapes the relationship between education and citizenship in particular ways. For example in Russia, becoming critical was associated with a new found freedom to criticise those in authority but one associated with risk and uncertainty; the South African lecturers associated critical thinking with anti-apartheid struggles, while in Britain critical thinking was linked to an institution's democratic responsibility to educate for democracy.

This is testament to how concepts such as critical thinking (and democracy and citizenship) come to be through a complex entanglement of social, political and cultural contexts. This argument has particular contemporary resonance to the UK as, in Summer 2015, young people signed up in huge numbers as members of the Labour party to vote for Jeremy Corbyn in the party leadership elections. These voters were cited as wanting more oppositional, transformative and critical political thinking and less spin and vacuous performance, with one voter stating that 'nobody in Westminster seems to have an ideology or stand for anything in particular' (Cosslett, 2015, para.5). Thus what it means to be critical and who represents a critical citizen or spokesperson in a particular historical or geographical context shifts according to the political and cultural moment.

However, notions of critical thinking as transformation, freedom or opposition are seen to be at odds with the neoliberal demands of increased regulation, measurement and governmentality, notions analysed in detail by Evans (2004). She argues that neoliberal practices of bureaucracy in universities have resulted in a stifling of the ability and space for thinking freely and have stifled intellectual creativity. In such a context, students face an intellectual context whereby:

Only battery farming for the mind promises that reason will never escape to serve anything except the most avaricious and limited keeper. (p.27)

Evans' view is that critical thinking's academic domestication has led to a loss of its transformative power. Similarly, Morrall and Goodman (2012), from nursing education, agree that the 'insidious saturation of the university system with bureaucracy and managerialism' (p.1) has undermined critical thinking. They claim that while one application of critical thinking is more technologised 'robust analysis' (p.2), other meanings include the use of theory; emancipatory pedagogies; critical and feminist theory and education for sustainability principles. They argue that nurses need learning that draws on *multiple* understandings of critical thinking including:

Going beyond accepting pre-existing social, professional or economic orders to challenge the very basis of our practices and thinking processes. (p.3)

Crucially, the authors highlight the dominance of instrumental vocabularies of critical thinking as a skill or process of rationality within higher education pedagogies and how this obscures other meanings of critical thinking such as a transformed way of being, as political or social engagement or as an embodied sensitivity to unequal power.

3.1.5 SKILL, DISPOSITION OR BOTH?

An emerging issue from the discussions above is the difference between those who see critical thinking as a set of tangible skills and processes and those that align it with a, potentially more tacit, set of attitudes or dispositions. While the more theoretical debates over definitions outlined above suggest a split between rationality/skill and embodied/dispositional forms of critical thinking, studies using empirical data from classroom practices tend to indicate that critical thinking is *both* a process and disposition.

Bailin and Siegel (2003) argue that critical thinking requires skills (such as the ability to assess the quality of arguments) *and* the disposition of a 'critical spirit' (p.185). Similarly, Krupat *et al.* (2011) surveyed medical educators in the USA to determine the extent to which critical thinking was a process (i.e. of synthesis, analysis and interpretation) or a

personal disposition (i.e. a personality trait or habit of mind) or both. They found the majority of educators defined critical thinking as a process involving some form of ability, concurrent with pedagogies that allow it to be taught and learnt. However, students appeared to enact critical thinking as *both* a process and a disposition, suggesting a mismatch between pedagogical assumptions and student behaviours. Golding (2011) further develops this notion of the multifaceted nature of criticality. He summarises research on pedagogies of critical thinking to argue that 'critical' students need five competencies:

- 1) Knowing how to analyse
- 2) The disposition to engage in critical thinking
- 3) An epistemic understanding that critical thinking is not about finding one right answer but about evaluating reasoned judgements
- 4) Fulfilling criteria for what counts as successful critical thinking in a given context
- 5) Understandings of the subject matter to think critically about.

He argues that students can be educated as critical thinkers by participating in a critical thinking 'community of enquiry' and by engaging in 'thought-encouraging questions' (p.357). This is inspired by Paul's (1998) work on Socratic questioning - a pedagogic method whereby, rather than just impart information, the educator asks a series of probing questions to enable students to learn by thinking about a topic in depth. This requires students having *both* abilities in reasoning, as well as a disposition for debate. Indeed, Kuhn (1991) asserts that being a successful critical thinker is about knowing how to know before it is possible to put the skill into practice, suggesting the importance of attitudes or abilities of meta-cognition, as well as knowledge of critical processes or techniques. This is paralleled by Eraut (2000) who talks about learning as involving significant meta-processes including self-awareness and monitoring, the framing of problems, searching for relevant knowledge, introducing value considerations and thinking about thinking itself (p.129). While theorists disagree about exactly what competencies are required to be a critical thinker and to what extent, there is a general consensus that being a critical thinker requires *both* skills and dispositions - particularly a meta-cognitive awareness of the processes involved in thinking.

As Fenwick and Edwards (2013) state, critical thinking is not a fixed notion but sustained by 'multifarious capillaries of associations and action' (p.37) of texts, materials and bodies. While this complexity means a correct or singular definition is elusive - as the debates above indicate - some definitions are more problematic than others. As the following section describes, being a critical thinker is tied up with the complex, embodied and contingent nature of learning in higher education, which individualised,

technologised and decontextualised rationalist or skills approaches to critical thinking tend to obscure.

3.2 KEY DEBATES IN CRITICAL THINKING

The research on defining critical thinking points to broader debates about critical thinking's boundaries, contexts and consequences including: the role of emotion in critical thinking; the extent to which critical thinking is an individualised act or a social practice; the cultural contexts shaping critical 'legitimacy' and how becoming critical is shaped by class, race and gender.

Discussions of critical thinking as a cognitive skill or a process of rational logic appear to position it as an act firmly in the head, rather than with the body or heart. Yet the notion that critical reasoning is 'rational' rests on a specific epistemological assumption that knowers can be separated from what is known. Thayer-Bacon (2000) offers a feminist challenge to notions of the disinterested and disembodied knower to argue that thinking:

Does not take place in our head or hearts, but are holistic activities experienced by all 'parts' of us, thinking, feeling and acting. (p.9)

Doddington (2007) agrees that the notion of the critical thinker as a rational, autonomous being who values objective knowledge obscures other aspects of what we should value and cherish about education and personhood, including 'sense, perception and embodied personal thinking' (p.459). This challenge is accepted by Ennis (1996) who added 'caring' to his list of critical thinking dispositions in response to earlier feminist critiques that his conceptualisation of critical thinking was constructed in relation to a privileged masculine figure who operates only under reason, rather than emotion. Similarly, Bailin and Siegel (2003) also emphasise the important role of emotion in thinking critically, for example the need to be sensitive to the views of others. They argue that critical *thinking* should not be seen in contrast to *feeling* but can include it - as long as reason is still considered as primary. Thus while 'emotion' is recognised as important to criticality, the centrality and extent to which it plays a role are subtly contested.

Yet if critical thinking is conceptualised more broadly as a disposition or way of being in the world, rather than just a pedagogical practice, this can potentially result in emotionally charged consequences. Becoming a critical thinker, by introducing questions and new standards of truth, can work to destabilise a student's identity. For example, Walkerdine's (2011) work on working-class students describes how higher education requires an unsettling shift in subjectivity, where the newly educated student feels the

entangled affects of both a splitting from or rejection of their homes and communities, as well as feeling isolated within privileged academic spaces. We cannot assume then, that becoming 'critically' educated always has positive outcomes, nor is it necessarily what current students studying in UK higher education have signed up for. Indeed, Morley (1998) reports on how using critical feminist pedagogies in the classroom could be problematic. For example bringing emotions into the feminist classroom produced tears and conflict and democratising learning through peer discussions raised questions over who held the authority in the room, the latter of which may become a poignant concern in relation to the 'value' of the student experience.

It is also interesting to consider whether critical thinking can be fully removed from the negative etymology of the word critical as:

Given to judging; esp. given to adverse or unfavourable criticism; faultfinding, censorious. (OED, 2013)

This definition has connotations of cynicism, rather than debate or dialogue, which may be at odds with the need for students to develop positive social relationships with fellow students. Indeed, Ehrenreich (2010) discusses how critical thinking presents an uncomfortable challenge in our increasingly 'positive thinking' society. Her work discusses how the 'positivity' vibe is entirely serviceable for neoliberalism because it demands an affective labour of cheerfulness whereby having the right 'attitude' (rather than specific skills) becomes key to success in the labour market. Furthermore, Ahmed (2010b) talks about how happiness is defined through our ability to be sociable, where those who do not share our ideas about goodness through their critical behaviours are read as 'killjoys'. A deeper understanding of critical thinking therefore involves engaging with what critical thinking *feels* like and how these feelings are socially constructed, embodied and reproduced (as in [Chapter 7](#)).

The link between pedagogical practices and emotions also suggests that critical thinking cannot be clearly boundaried within the knowing body because critical knowers are embedded within their social worlds, cultures and relationships. Consequently, Atkinson (1997) describes critical thinking as a tacit social practice – 'more at the level of common sense than a rational, transparent – and – especially – teachable set of behaviours' (p.72). Similarly, Mitchell *et al.* (2004) in their research with UK undergraduates agree that:

Any critical act takes place in a context which consists of social, educational, disciplinary, emotional, ethical, cognitive and political elements: these are themselves in dynamic interaction and will be mediated by... the shape and quality of the individual self. (p.9)

Thus rather than critical thinking representing a cognitive act by reasoned, detached bodies, such theorists see it as emerging *through* the web of social, material and discursive knowledge practices that constitute critical thinking and *with* the different bodies that enact it. For example, Scott (2000) looks at critical thinking in a critical response to a text essay written by an English Literature undergraduate. She argues that critical thinking is an on-going activity produced both in relation to disciplinary canons of what critical thinking looks like and in dialogue with the thinking of the reader/marker, a process in which the writer is both intuitively and consciously involved. Furthermore, Sullivan (2012) applies Paul's (1998) model of critical thinking to nursing education and highlights the important role not only of pedagogic models but of *role* models, suggesting that it is a practice best developed in dialogue with others. Students need to see how educators and other nurses use their critical faculties in order to see how an 'ideal' critical thinker asks questions, challenges assumptions and incorporates critical evaluation of evidence in their decision-making. Therefore, not only does the experience of critical thinking shift in accordance with the social, embodied and relational contexts in which one is embedded or entangled at particular moments, but focusing on the significance of these social and relational contexts appears to be pedagogically productive.

There are also important debates about the cultural specificity of critical thinking. Atkinson (1997) argues that teaching critical thinking to non-native speakers is problematic because of its reliance on specific cultural norms, which are read through indicators such as social behaviours and preferences, faith and language and related to a specific global context or ethnic group. Similarly, in a series of essays, Asad, Brown, Butler and Mahmood (2009), discuss whether critique is secular. Although by critique they refer to the broader philosophical theory of academic analysis, this has consequences for thinking about students' more everyday practices. Brown talks about how the academy is governed by a presumptive secularisation of academic criticality. She traces its emergence to Western, Euro-centric post-enlightenment thinking which positions critical thinking in relation to 'a tacit presumption of reason's capacity to unveil error...replacing opinion with truth and subjectivism with science' (pp.9-11). Critical thinking's close association with such histories means that what it *is* has been shaped by specific socio-political and historical contexts and is always subject to a practice of cultural translation. Butler goes on to argue that 'depending on which normative framework controls the semantic field; the phenomenon in question will turn out to be a different sort of thing' (p.101) and also that critique represents 'embodied and affective practices, modes of subjectivity that are bound up with their objects and thus relational'

(p.125). These essays overall argue that critical thinking is not inherently secular or Western but that how it is constituted is culturally, politically and contextually loaded.

The role of culture in relation to nationality and race in the positioning of the critical thinker is often exemplified in relation to Chinese students. Atkinson (1997) describes the misguided perception that students from Confucian cultures (e.g. China, Korea, Japan) are quieter and more passive than Western students, better adept to surface learning and are consequently less critical learners. This notion is challenged by Floyd (2011) who studied the difficulties Chinese students in Australia experience in learning critical thinking in a second language. She describes how Chinese students' perceived lack of critical abilities tends to get interpreted as being a matter of a generic cultural deficit – rather than related to language learning. Indeed, Tian and Low (2011) emphasise that notions of critical thinking *are* present in Confucian cultures but that other factors, specifically students' previous educational experiences, are more likely to affect performance than culture alone. And yet, the role of culture in critical thinking gets over-stated and essentialised in relation to Chinese students, without assessing other factors, such as language ability. Furthermore, socio-political cultures of authority and fear creates contexts in which criticality is not simply culturally unacceptable but dangerous. For example, Felix (2011) analyses the place of critical thinking in Kazakhstan and describes how the continued cultural resonance of the Gulag shapes subsequent dynamics of power, identity and subjectivity in the classroom and how this influences students' unwillingness to engage critically. This reflects both Butler and Brown's concerns that practices of critical thinking are culturally specific and assume the privileging (and safety of) Western ways of knowing.

The above debates also point to how the figure of the critical thinker is constructed along gendered, classed and raced lines. Indeed, a common image result from an online search for critical thinker/thinking is Rodin's 1880 statue:



Figure 2: *The Thinker* (Auguste Rodin, 1880)

'The Thinker' as a solitary, masculine figure, deep in quiet thought is not accidental, according to Thayer-Bacon (1998, 2000), but reflects a specific paradigm of critical thought and a specific embodiment of the critical thinker along masculinist (as akin to mastery or rationality) lines. She offers a feminist re-description of critical thinking as 'constructive thinking', refocusing attention on relationships and embodiment and challenging the exclusionary gendered discourses constructing what it means to embody critical thinking.

Similarly Burke (2008) considers how critical thinking, like academic writing, acts as an exclusive practice that privileges particular gendered, classed and racialised forms of knowledge and knowledge making. For example, academic discourse potentially recreates binaries of scientific/objective/male and emotive/subjective/female. Work on academic literacies also makes the case that academic skills and abilities, particularly writing, are socially and culturally located practices that regulate what constitutes a legitimate student (Lea & Street, 1998). Instead of understanding academic practices as unitary ways of being, speaking and writing, these authors recognise that higher education pedagogies need to make space for multiple literacies. This is exemplified beautifully by Bowstead (2011) who narrates a story about academic voice where she the academic writer is in discussion with 'Gill', a mature student writing her dissertation whose writing has been critiqued for being too personal and too descriptive. Gill's voice is only given authority through the extent to which it conforms to traditional structures of academic discourse that rest on ideas of authority as objectivity. These notions of academic authority also draw on dominant constructions of university students as 'white, male, able bodied and unencumbered by responsibilities of care and paid-work' (Leathwood & Read, 2009, p.599). Consequently, [Chapter 8](#) unpacks neutralised

characterisations of critical thinkers to discuss whether those deemed 'Other' require more complex processes of adaption and self-regulation to higher education's critical pedagogical practices.

3.3 CRITICAL THINKING AND THE PEDAGOGIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The lack of clarity around what critical thinking *is* has consequences for how it can be taught and how critical learning can be measured. This section surveys some of the pedagogical implications of the debates detailed above for teachers and students in higher education.

Davies' (2011) concerns about the lack of critical thinking in universities is supported by evidence from studies that have used critical thinking tests on students and graduates. For example, Arum and Roksa (2010) conducted a large-scale longitudinal study of 2,322 North American university students who took the Collegiate Learning Assessment test (CLA). Results showed that nearly half (45%) of the students' sampled exhibited no statistically significant gains in their critical thinking after two-years at college. This is despite the fact that 99% of the college faculty surveyed saying that developing critical thinking is a 'very important' or 'essential' goal of undergraduate education. Similarly, in Australia, Badcock *et al.* (2010) compared students' grade point average (GPA) with test results for general skills (including critical thinking) using the Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA). They found that while GPA marks rose, GSA marks changed very little over the duration of their course. However they did find a positive correlation between GPA and GSA scores, suggesting that students who perform better academically are likely to have higher levels of generic skills. This parallels work by Korkmaz (2012), working in computer science, who found a positive relationship between disciplinary specific programming ability and critical thinking. While these tests potentially point to university students' *lack* of ability to become or develop as critical thinkers and for institutions to teach it effectively, they also raise some of the potential issues with *measuring* criticality.

For example, there are subtle differences between the kinds of methodologies used in these studies and the assumptions they make about what critical thinking *is*. The CLA used by Arum and Roksa is a standardised open-ended response test developed in the USA and aimed at assessing critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and written communication skills. To give some indication of how prolific tests like these are used, from 2002-12 over 700 different US and international universities, schools and colleges have used the CLA to benchmark university students' learning (Council for Aid

to Education, 2015). The GSA test used by Badcock and colleagues was developed in Australia in 2001 and includes a multiple-choice test for critical thinking, interpersonal understanding and problem solving, as well as two writing tasks to measure argument and report writing skills. Crucially, both of these tests leave space for open-ended responses, compared to other standardised multiple-choice tests. For example, the Watson-Glaser Critical Appraisal test is a psychometric test commonly used for graduate recruitment in the UK – such as for entry to the Civil Service and the Bank of England (Pearson Education, 2015). It comprises multiple-choice questions in response to a short excerpt of text in order to test a series of inferences e.g. that a statement is true or false or that an argument is logical (Watson & Glaser, 2006). Similarly, the Smith-Whetton critical reasoning test is also a multiple-choice standardised test but includes the evaluation of numerical data in charts and graphs as well as information processing skills. While the Watson-Glaser and Smith-Whetton test for evidence of critical thinking via the ability to process information in order to reach a correct answer, the design of the CLA and GSA recognise that a better understanding of someone's critical thinking ability is in seeing it performed and applied.

Yet *all* these tests assume a conceptualisation of critical thinking as a measurable and transferrable skill, a definition, as detailed above, that is highly contested in the literature. However Pithers and Soden (1999) recognise that approaches to testing critical thinking that would, for example, test for dispositional abilities as well as skills, are unlikely to be cost-effective or practical. While critical thinking tests have a potential pedagogic use in relation to initial benchmarking of students' critical abilities, such tests and the studies based around them assume a precise and potentially simplistic definition of critical thinking and tell us little about how students *feel* about doing and being critical.

The poor results of these tests when administered to students, also questions the extent to which critical thinking is being developed effectively through higher education's pedagogies. Indeed, results of whether critical thinking can in fact be taught and learnt appear to be mixed. Barnett and Francis (2012) tested undergraduates for evidence of 'higher-order' thinking using Watson-Glaser (2006) and found an insignificant difference between those who received some instruction in critical thinking and those who did not. However, Niu *et al.* (2013) completed a meta-analysis on whether instructional interventions did actually make a difference to student critical thinking. They found that while empirical studies produced inconsistent results, the general consensus was that

interventions were effective and it *was* possible to improve student's critical thinking through classroom teaching.

Effective pedagogies for teaching critical thinking tend to be developed and tested in the disciplines and point to a range of initiatives and pedagogical approaches. Pithers and Soden (2000) specifically highlight the effectiveness of small group tutorials to create critical dialogue in the classroom and the use of problem-based learning to encourage students to apply critical thinking to their disciplines. More specifically, Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2004), working with UK Sociology undergraduates, have developed a scale for 'critical sociological thinking' which includes cross cultural awareness, knowledge of two-sides of an argument and using pertinent examples. They subsequently found the scale useful as a pedagogical tool to help shape their curricula in line with best practice for developing student critical thinkers. As with the use of psychometric tests, this pedagogical approach also strongly associates critical thinking with a taxonomy or technology, as opposed to an ideology or attitude. Importantly, the authors make a claim for this being a disciplinary specific pedagogy for a disciplinary specific way of thinking critically. This indicates a lack of a clear *how to* model for pedagogical success in developing student critical thinkers that translates *across* the disciplines.

Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop's (2004) study also supports the notion of critical thinking as a subject specific, rather than a transferrable concept – of which there has been considerable debate. McPeck (1990) argues that thinking is always thinking *about* something and so it cannot be taught or understood generically e.g. through generic logic or critical thinking courses. Applying this to Romanian higher education, Dumitru (2012) states that because becoming a critical thinker involves negotiating complex psychological realities with multiple components, students struggle to transfer criticality across different domains and tasks. He also claims that studying critical thinking in ways that are fully integrated within trans or singular-disciplinary pedagogies is more effective than standalone courses in developing students' abilities to transfer critical faculties to their daily lives. Hatcher (2006) analyses the efficacy of standalone critical thinking courses compared to those integrated within programmes and found those students studying on discipline specific or applied courses had significantly higher test scores. These results have parallels with existing work on academic writing in higher education, which argues that because it involves multiple literacies, it is most effectively taught within subject disciplines by subject experts where writing can be crafted and

evaluated in terms of its epistemological assumptions, as well as specific grammatical techniques (Lea & Street, 1998).

However, Ennis (1989) states that some aspects of critical thinking, e.g. the teaching or logic and argument, *are* transferrable to other educational and social situations and, as such, 'generic' approaches have pedagogical value. Robinson (2011) agrees that there is a need for a generic language of critical thinking instruction. For example, knowing the terms and concepts used to evaluate arguments can constitute for students a 'useful first step on the road to becoming a critical and self-reflective thinker' (pp.284-85). A helpful middle-ground is provided by Moore (2011a) whose analysis points to a diversity of understandings and practices across disciplinary locations, challenging Ennis' generic model. Yet he also describes these approaches sharing a 'generic' conceptualisation of critical thinking as 'meta-critique' - involving flexibility of thought and the ability to negotiate different knowledge contexts. Indeed, the general/specific debate seems unnecessarily polarising between two extreme positions. From employing both generic and disciplinary specific models in my teaching, the latter was no doubt more effective in engaging students in thinking critically about their subject as the research evidence confirms, but the former was still useful as an introduction to students who are struggling with just what the word 'critical' means in their essay question, for example. Similarly, while Bailin and Siegel (2002) agree that there are general things that can be said about critical thinking, they agree that it is pedagogically more productive and effective to consider its disciplinary specific or applied nature.

Pithers and Soden's (2000) review also stated that student-centred approaches to developing critical thinking' are the most effective. Yet while there is a body of work looking at *how* criticality should be taught and *whether* students are learning it according to results of standardised tests, there is very little work that looks specifically at *student* experiences or understandings of critical thinking. In highlighting this lack of research, Phillips and Bond (2004) interviewed thirteen second and third-year Business Management students at an Australasian university, where the main course themes were critical analysis and communication. They noted four qualitatively different student understandings of critical thinking - a) weighing up; b) looking from all the angles; c) looking back on and d) looking beyond what there is. Although there was variation in meaning within these definitions, they argued that students were closely aligned with these categories, which the authors saw as developing along a continuum from A-D. The notion of students having fixed or shifting definitions will be examined in relation to the research data in [Chapter 6](#). However, their analysis focused less on students'

perspectives and more on technicalities and processes of categorisation, leaving unfilled student-centred understandings e.g. of what critical thinking *is*, whether it is *important* to students and *why* and what it *feels* like to be a critical thinker as a student in higher education.

There is one large-scale project from the University of Southampton comparing Modern Language and Social Work students through interviews, observations and policy analysis, which attempted to address this gap, looking at whether students define and understand critical thinking differently depending on their subject (Ford *et al.*, 2004, Mitchell *et al.*, 2004, Brumfit *et al.*, 2005, Ford *et al.*, 2005). In Modern Languages, Brumfit *et al.* (2005) discuss how learning to think and speak in another language is in itself a critical act but warned against causal relationships between language and cultural instruction and criticality, emphasising the complexity of learning and thinking as often individualised processes. Studying Social Work students, Ford *et al.* (2005) examined the positive impact of work-placement on students being able to demonstrate aspects of being a critical professional – such as being able to link formal knowledge with practice experience. However, these students rarely went beyond the agendas set by others – to challenge structures of practice or engage with theory, for example. The report comparing these two subject areas by Mitchell *et al.* (2004) included interviews with eighteen undergraduates from the first to final-year and across the two disciplines. Using Barnett's (1997) work, they suggest that students develop critical thinking on three levels – pre-criticality, criticality in use with other's agendas and criticality and world knowledge, with autonomous agendas, the latter being closer to Barnett's concept of *critical beings*. They also state how students are reliant on various resources to enact criticality such as knowledge, skills and personal values. Consequently, they argue, critical thinking can be seen as a social practice, albeit one with 'cross-disciplinary commonalities and underlying intellectual rules' (Mitchell *et al.*, 2004, p.9). What is unique about these studies is their focus on students' experiences and their expansion of the sites for critical learning to include those outside the classroom, for example in the work placement. However, the notion of three distinct levels parallels some of the psychological development approaches discussed above (e.g. Kuhn, 1999) and similarly is intensely normative, failing to make visible the contextual, contingent and embodied nature of critical thinking.

3.4 CONCLUSION - THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT CRITICAL THINKING

As I finalised writing this chapter, I received an email alert from a publisher with 120 new articles this month with the keywords 'critical thinking' - spanning topics including philosophy, inclusive education and security and intelligence studies. After browsing some of the more relevant abstracts, I spotted nothing of immediate relevance to this review. This is testament to the breadth of research on critical thinking and the ways it feeds into the educational and philosophical issues and concerns of those working across diverse contexts. It also explains why it felt so difficult to bring critical thinking to order in this chapter.

Given this breadth, what potential is there to imagine other ways of thinking about criticality? The gaps in the research include a distinct lack of work that looks at undergraduates and what they have to say about critical thinking. While the University of Southampton project made important gains in this area, there is still a need for further work that explores what it means to be a critical student in higher education. In particular, there is a lack of work, which takes account of critical thinking's complexity, contingency and embodiments. Fenwick and Edwards (2013) in their account of critical thinking as a network of interrelated knowledge practices, contend that analyses of pedagogies which look at the role of the social and material allow us to focus more deeply on entanglements of unequal power such as 'when particular accounts become more visible or valued, how they circulate and what work they perform in their process' (p.35). Thus employing such thinking in my research allows me to extend my analysis of critical thinking beyond those accounts that focus on the individual in a disembodied and decontextualised and homogenised manner, towards accounts of criticality that focus on the dynamic relationship between critical thinkers and their context.

4. A FEMINIST METHODOLOGY FOR RESEARCHING CRITICAL THINKING

'Theories offer another language...of distance, of irony, of imagination.'

(Ball, 1995, p.267)

My intention in this research is to expand critical thinking's lexicon and apply feminist theory to what is often seen as a gender-neutral subject. As Ball suggests above, I am reimagining another language for exploring critical thinking - by employing feminist thinkers and by engaging a feminist sensibility to analysis that takes account of how research is situated in and shaped by social, linguistic and material contexts, which are structured and reproduced through unequal power. [Section 4.1](#) explains the contribution of feminism to my methodological thinking and research design, including my active intention to cite predominantly feminist thinkers. I then summarise my reasons for turning to feminist poststructuralist and feminist new-material philosophies and their influence on my study. This is followed by an introduction to the two key theorists I use - Sara Ahmed in [Section 4.2](#) and Karen Barad in [Section 4.3](#) - and how the theoretical clashes and connections in their work provoke and inspire my own thinking in [Section 4.4](#). Finally, [Section 4.5](#) summarises the key ontological (questions over what constitutes reality and how we can understand it), epistemological (explorations of what constitutes knowledge and how it can be obtained) and ethical (moral and philosophical principles of the research) drawn from these accumulated theoretical discussions.

4.1 DOING FEMINIST RESEARCH

I studied gender as a category of historical analysis and the history of women in my BA and MA in History and, as a women working in various higher education administrative and professional roles, I became highly sensitised to how gender operates in the privileged spaces of higher education. While I had *heard* of feminist theory at university, I only *felt* feminism later - as I saw gender inequality in the lack of female university management (Morley & Crossouard, 2016) or in the ways I was positioned unequally compared to my male colleagues, as a consequence of being younger and female. Using feminist enquiry comes from these experiences as well as from a substantive interest in how gendered discourses regulate what counts as valid knowledge and knowers in higher education. As Hey (2006) argues 'who grants or withholds authority, and what is validated as legitimate knowledge is an important and contested question' in feminist thinking about higher education (p.296). Furthermore, Ropers-Huilman and Winters (2011) state that feminist research needs to increase its visibility in the higher education

literature because of the valuable perspective it offers to understanding the gendered effects of higher education on its participants.

I was not just interested in gender as an analytical category, but was also drawn to feminist accounts of social science research practices that took apart taken for granted research norms (e.g. Letherby, 2011). I think back to my research training and how we were presented with the 'great male thinkers' in chronological order – from Popper to Marx – before a female lecturer came to talk about feminism. While that was where the module stopped abruptly - that was where my interest in theory began. I was inspired by early feminist critiques of the supposed neutrality of research - that it was power free and gender neutral (e.g. Hartsock, 1983, Hawkesworth, 1989), that it could access 'truth' objectively (e.g. Haraway, 1988, McRobbie, 1982) and that openly political work was biased and therefore problematic (e.g. Rose, 1983, Lather, 1986). I was particularly drawn to the notion that:

The value of theory lies in its power to get in the way: to offend and interrupt...it stops us from forgetting that the world is not laid out in plain view before our eyes. (MacLure, 2010 pp.277-278)

I later received new inspiration from a conference² addressing feminist poststructuralist and new-materialist theories in educational research, which drew me towards theoretical approaches that scrutinised the complexity of researching the social world, specifically the work of Karen Barad.

4.1.1 WHAT DOES FEMINIST RESEARCH LOOK LIKE?

Feminist research represents a broad and complex tradition. DuBois (1983) conceptualises empirical feminist work as using mainly qualitative methods to uncover female experience 'to address women's lives and experiences in their own terms' (p.108). However, this definition does not account for the breadth of feminist research, which uses a range of qualitative and quantitative methods and goes beyond women and their experiences to look at gender relations more widely - often from vastly different political and epistemological perspectives. Indeed, Cohen *et al.* (2011b) state that despite feminism's close connection to qualitative methods, particularly in UK Sociology, there are a surprising number of research articles which employ quantitative methods. Most notably, Hughes and Cohen (2010) compiled a special issue of the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* on using quantitative methods for researching gender.

² Summer Institute in Qualitative Research: Putting Theory To Work, July 2013, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Further testifying to feminism's conceptual and methodological breadth/depth, Maynard and Purvis' (1994) edited collection on feminist research contains chapters addressing diverse questions of race, ethnicity, sexuality and historical specificity, as well as explorations of feminist epistemologies and issues of power in the research process. Feminist research is therefore neither unitary nor monolithic.

Furthermore, the existence of a distinctly 'feminist' methodology is disputed by Hammersley (1992) who argues that feminist research can be broadly characterised by its scope - including a focus on gender as a category of analysis, the primacy of experience over method and the recognition of hierarchies of power within social research - rather than a specific methodology (theory or principles guiding research enquiry) or method (research tools or techniques). Indeed, many methodological approaches used by feminists are shared by other critical social scientists - such as a commitment to social change and to non-hierarchical research relationships. Yet Harding (1987) argues that, while feminist researchers do share *methods* with others, their work is rooted in specific *epistemologies* that seek knowledge about women's lives and experiences in order to enact equity-orientated change. This epistemological focus on women's experiences as a unitary concept is subject to further challenge by those who argue that the category of 'woman' as subjects of feminist research it is not sufficient to understand the complexity of social lives (e.g. Butler, 1999) and by those who call for analyses which take account of the intersection of gender with other sites of exclusion including class (e.g. Skeggs, 1997) and race and ethnicity (e.g. Collins, 1997, Mohanty, 2003b, Brah & Phoenix, 2004) in the production of gendered lives. Despite such multiplicity, feminist research can be broadly distinguished as a 'mode of analysis, a method of approaching life and politics' (Hartsock, 1981, p.35), that considers gender a key structuring feature of social, political and economic life. Within such thinking, gender can act as both an 'effect' (a process produced *in* and *through* socio, cultural and material relations) and a 'cause' (that enacts consequences for subjectivity, culture and modes of behaviour).

Poststructuralist feminist thinking is similarly not a unified phenomenon but can be described as thinking which questions how knowledge claims become constituted; which abandons the notion that empirical enquiry can directly connect researchers to experience, knowledge and reality and which challenges humanistic conceptions of self, agency, power and emancipation (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). It is fundamentally concerned with multiple truths and seeks to 'wrench meanings from their taken for granted contexts and identify their effects' (*ibid*, p.89) through a focus on texts, language

and discourse. In such ontology, knowledge is relative and fluid and the social world is always in flux, ever changing and indefinable (Ahmed, 1998). Furthermore, it seeks to de-centre the essentialist subject, arguing for the ways bodies are socially and discursively constituted and reproduced. Thus the agency of the subject in poststructuralist theory:

Seems to lie in the subject's ability to decode and recode its identity within discursive formations and cultural practices. (St-Pierre, 2011, p.504)

For example, Butler (1993) argues that gender is not a property of subjects with agency but 'a process of reiteration by which both 'subjects' and 'acts' come to appear' (p.9). In my own work this leads me to ask questions about critical thinking as a *discourse*; how institutional, linguistic and social practices, beliefs, subject positions and norms are mediated to produce the concept of 'critical thinking' and how a multiplicity of meanings gets produced through bodies *doing* and *speaking about* critical thinking. In short I ask, 'who gets to be a [critical] subject in a particular discourse' and 'in a particular set of [academic] practices' (St-Pierre, 2010, p.503). Methodologically, feminist poststructuralist thinking leads me towards an ontological and epistemological position that recognises multiple meanings and realities, which do not necessarily exist objectively in order to be 'captured' but come to be through the *doing* of research.

As a challenge to poststructuralist thinking's alleged privileging of the discursive, the theoretical tools of new-materialist feminism offer a philosophy, politics and method that:

Refuses the linguistic paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations. (Braidotti, 2012, para.4)

Feminist new-materialist philosophy is critical of the power of the discursive to signify other aspects of the social and material world. Because words and things operate on the same ontological level:

Language cannot achieve the distance and externality that would allow it to represent – i.e. to stand over, stand for and stand in for – the world. (MacLure, 2013b, p.660)

However, there are debates over whether this constitutes a misreading of poststructuralist theory, which arguably has always engaged with the material (see Ahmed, 2008, Jackson & Mazzei, 2010). For example, Foucault's (1995) work addressed both the physicality of the panopticon as well as its discursive symbolism in understanding surveillance and power and their effects on the body. Indeed, it is easy to overlook such complications and there is a sense in which the language games of social

theory work to claim symbolic currency and power over particular theoretical readings. Yet it is not that the material is absent from poststructuralist work but that 'it had not been accorded its due in the discursive laid writings of poststructuralist theorists and methodologists' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2010 p.110). The 'newness' of new-materialism is therefore not about the insertion/privileging of material but a 'shaking up of the privileging of the discursive in postmodern thought' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2010, p.113). Indeed, Barad does not reject the discursive or privilege the material but focuses on the specifically *entangled* nature of the material and the discursive whereby the discursive is always-already materially produced and vice-versa.

Feminist new-materialist thinking emerged alongside a theoretical shift towards post-human conceptualisations, where bodies are reconceptualised not as independent free agents but as emerging through the entanglement (Barad, 2007) or assemblage (Deleuze, 2004) of social-discursive-material practices. In education specifically, new-materialist theories offer a way of looking at how students, academics, institutions and pedagogies are co-constituted and entangled, shifting focus away from individualised acts of knowing to multiplicities, processes and flow (Taylor & Iverson, 2013). As Quinn (2013) argues, one of the strengths of applying a feminist new-materialist perspective to education is its emphasis on:

The interconnectedness of all matter, so that the project of learning becomes not what distinguishes me from all that is around me and makes me superior to it, but what makes me part of it. (p.742)

While feminist new-materialist work is diverse, it is united in its allegiance to feminism and its emphasis on the significance of materiality, or the stuff of things.

As [Section 4.4](#) describes, debates about the prominence of the material in the constitution of subjectivity have a history in feminist thinking. Yet crucially, 'new' materialist thinking differs from Marxist-feminist debates about the material as a structural condition, which positions the centrality of the human (and crucially, gendered patterns of inequality) in economic relationships (e.g. Jackson, 2001). Instead matter does not 'form an empty stage for, or background space to, human relations' (Taylor & Iverson, 2013, p.666), but is given a degree of agency and power to shape social life. For example, in a classroom setting recognition would be given to the 'thing power' (Bennett, 2004, no-page) of bodies, clothing, weather, furniture and the time of day to shape a particular pedagogical moment. Furthermore, the material can also constitute language and texts - such as how the bodily entanglements of language e.g.

‘tears, sneers, sighs, silences, sniffs and laughter’ of a verbal encounter are actually ‘quasi-linguistic’ – simultaneously both material and discursive (MacLure, 2013b, p.658).

Barad’s (2007) feminist new-materialist work specifically allows me get to grips with how students negotiate the multiple discourses of what it means to be critical, as well as how criticality’s affects work through, and impact upon, bodies. In short, this is about attending to the nature of micro-political practices in higher education, defined as:

The subterranean conflicts, competitions and minutiae of social relations and how power is relayed through seemingly trivial incidents and transactions. (Morley, 2006, p.543)

This parallels Barad’s concern with how power operates through the entanglements of the social-material-discursive that constitute and reproduce social life. For example, Barad’s notion that things do not pre-exist but emerge *through* the intra-action of socio-material practices also challenges me to think about criticality as practice in flux that comes into being through an institution, its discourses and its bodies rather than a fixed set of *a priori* knowledge or behaviours possessed by individual, reasoning bodies. Methodologically, such theories challenge what is a fairly traditional, humanistic qualitative research design and have forced me to reinvigorate and problematise ‘interpretative’ analysis, as [Chapter 5](#) explains. [Section 4.2.3](#) discusses some of the ontological and epistemological clashes between poststructuralist, phenomenological and material feminist thinking. Yet despite tensions across these multiple feminist positions they all can be distinguished by:

The questions feminists ask, the location of the researcher within the process of research and within theorising, and the intended purpose of the work produced. (Letherby, 2003, p.5)

4.1.2 FEMINIST CITATION PRACTICES

In any research project, decisions are made about which theories/theorists to include/exclude. These decisions, which often rely on happenstance, occurred through a mixture of my intellectual history, recommendations from supervisors and encounters with texts, people and conferences. However, these stimulations *also* emerged through intellectual histories and trends that are dominated by white, male and euro-centric thinkers, whereby certain theorists take up space than others due to their historic position of dominance over knowledge production. Thus Ahmed (2013) discusses how citation acts as a ‘reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies’ (para.3), where only certain theorists become cited as authoritative knowledge, rendering the field so it becomes conservatively constructed.

Indeed, I often get asked why I did not use Foucault, Bourdieu, Deleuze or Ranciere in my work. While this can be a legitimate and useful question, it often feels as if I should slot my feminist work into existing (male) intellectual histories in order to give it legitimacy. While I find their work inspiring and do cite it occasionally, particularly where, for example, Deleuze informs feminist new-materialist thinking (e.g. Deleuze & Guattari, 2004 cited in Ringrose & Renold, 2014), it is important that feminist research creates its own intellectual traditions.

Consequently, what I am trying to do in this thesis is to interrupt existing citation practices as an attempt to challenge this narrow reproduction of 'authorities'. This 'feminist act' is not an attempt to essentialise ideas as being 'gendered' but to rely on theorists who identify as feminist because of the specific questions they ask. To principally cite feminist theories represents an agential cut in my work, which certainly makes exclusions, but simultaneously makes *inclusions* in its attempts to re-frame the sociology of higher education within a feminist tradition.

4.2 SARA AHMED

I was drawn to Ahmed's work at the beginning of my doctoral journey as I struggled with how to research just one broad concept and as I worried that my research would become messy and difficult to tie down. Her work on happiness (2010b) and on diversity (2012) are testaments to the depth of analysis that can be achieved through 'following around' a singular yet complex notion. As she writes in *The Promise of Happiness*:

I follow the word happiness around, I notice what it is up to, where it goes and who or what gets associated with it. (2010b, p.14)

I was inspired by this phenomenological analytical style and sought to do something similar with critical thinking – to follow it and see how it was understood, discussed and valued and how this interacted with institutional priorities, pedagogies and the diverse critical bodies and locations my participants occupied. Furthermore, Ahmed's feminist theorisations (1998, 2004, 2010b, 2012, 2015) are powerful for thinking through what behaviours, values and gestures become routinised as critical thinking, how boundaries between legitimate/illegitimate critical bodies get discursively produced and how practices of critical thinking become affectively invested as 'happy objects'.

Ahmed theorises the ways that our desires are socially constructed and reproduced. For example, her work on the circularity of affect (2010b) helps me consider how practices of critical thinking circulate and stick to certain bodies and the implications of this for specific (for example, gendered) bodies being reproduced as (il)legitimate critical voices.

She states that happiness is an orientation towards objects (which can be feelings, people, atmospheres or places) and that such objects make us feel good because they are already prescribed as being good for us. Thus affect is contagious and shared and the good life is 'the life...lived in the right way, by doing the right things again and again' (Ahmed, 2010b, p.36). Yet because such an affective remaking is shaped by common goods and shared desires, happiness is about the narrowing of horizons along normative lines, whereby:

If we take the shape of what is given...we experience the comfort of being given the right shape. (Ahmed, 2010b, p.79)

Conversely, we become alienated when we do not 'experience pleasure' from 'proximity to objects...attributed as being good' (*ibid*, p.41). Ahmed names those who do not share normative notions of happiness as 'affect aliens' - as those who are 'alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world and how they affect others' (*ibid*, p.164). This is not a happy/unhappy binary but a continual remaking of our affective investments through our social relations and our bodily engagements with the world. In such ontology, affects come in to being through the lived experience of bodies being shaped/reshaped through the discursive and social.

The notion of 'affect aliens' is testament to the affective tensions of occupying counter-hegemonic spaces, which being critical often necessitates. In reflecting on sitting around the dinner table with her family, Ahmed (2010a) describes the 'shared disapproval...the glances' (no-page) when she exercises her critical thinking by identifying something as being problematic and the sense of alienation she experienced by her critique and their subsequent disapproval. She identifies how those who refuse the promise of happiness (with their 'bad feeling politics') become positioned as the cause of bad feeling, exemplified in the characters of the feminist killjoy, unhappy queer and melancholic migrant. For example, the feminist figure is constructed as killing a sense of shared joy by disrupting the comfortable and refusing to join conventions of happiness in the same way:

Feminist killjoys: how often we ruin an atmosphere. To become assigned a killjoy is to be the cause of the loss of shared merriment. When we willingly receive this assignment, we are willing to be this cause, which is not the same thing as making this cause our cause. We learn how histories are condensed in the very intangibility of an atmosphere, or in the tangibility of the bodies that seem to get in the way. (Ahmed, 2014a, para.16)

To be against happiness is not to desire unhappiness. Instead, it is recognition of how optimism, hope and happiness become technologies of control, particularly in relation to

gender roles, heteronormativity and hegemony. For example, in not wishing to be a body that 'gets in the way', critique gets silenced. Instead, Ahmed (2010b) calls for an enactment of queer pessimism 'a refusal to be optimistic about the right things in the right kind of way' (p.162). This relates back to Berlant's (2004, 2011) work addressing how desires are normatively shaped and modelled. Berlant argues that subjects experience a relation of 'cruel optimism' in desiring unachievable fantasies of the 'good life' which, like Ahmed's queer pessimism, detail the powerful role of affect, as produced in the social, in shaping subjectivity.

Ahmed also articulates how criticality as a gesture is reproduced through specific histories that position certain bodies such as the feminist and queer critical voice as being affectively troublesome. She states that:

Some more than others are given a place at the table, just as some more than others are at home in the body of an institution. (2012, p.122)

Critical voices become entangled within the multiple ways bodies are marked and unequally positioned in the academy. The notion of critical beings as legitimate/illegitimate as a consequence of their gendered, classed and raced bodies will be examined in [Chapter 8](#).

Furthermore, her work on diversity considers how institutions make claims about and on behalf of institutions and their members. Such speech acts shape what can be said and by whom and demonstrate the power of institutions to decide who and what gets comfortable. For example, Ahmed (2012) talks about how the commitment to 'diversity' in higher education acts as a 'non-performative' in that the act of speaking diversity does not result in action that diversity is or will be done. Instead, diversity policy has a merely symbolic role, reassuring people that their interests are represented yet resulting in a lack of action or decision-making. The consequence is that the concept of diversity becomes divorced from the structural inequalities it claims to represent and that this silences talk about racial inequality. This process of speech acts, standing in for acts (saying but not doing) challenges both what can be defined under the concept of critical thinking and what and who can get stuck behind it. Much of this thinking is inspired by Butler's (1988) work on speech acts which looks how the appearance of gender does not reflect a stable model or concept of identity but is instead a 'performative accomplishment' (p.520) which gets constituted and reproduced differently through its doing. This leads me to ask questions about the constitution and reproduction (rather than the stability of) the concept of critical thinking such as: what factors regulate critical thinking being identified as legitimate in pedagogical spaces and what practices and

bodies are privileged and excluded by these discourses. In particular, I explore some of the micro-political tensions over defining critical thinking in [Chapter 6](#), especially in relation to students' desires to be recognised by the institution as successful 'critical' students.

Finally, Ahmed (2012) also comments on how the neutralising language used to speak about race becomes an act of 'overing':

The fact that diversity is not a scary word is part of the problem; if it is detached from scary issues such as power and inequality, it is harder for diversity to do anything in its travels. (p.66)

Similarly, in considering the relationship between criticality, gender and sociability, McRobbie (2011) argues that the critical language from the feminist movement e.g. 'empowerment' and 'equality', have been incorporated into a mainstream, neutralised discourse that has become detrimental to widespread feminist critique. I am interested in exploring whether the language of critical thinking has been similarly institutionalised and assimilated into pedagogic socio-cultural practices. Consequently, [Chapter 9](#) analyses the consequences of a limited instrumental, pedagogical vocabulary for conceptualising critical thinking's value and power.

Theoretically, Ahmed combines poststructuralism and phenomenology. For example, her work on higher education and inclusion (2012) uses poststructuralism to explore how subjects are positioned in the academy differently as a consequence of the circulation of competing gendered, classed and racialised discourses, with phenomenological questions contributing to how lived experience shapes bodies. Yet these two traditions clash, with phenomenology focusing on phenomena as experienced through human engagement and poststructuralism critiquing the notion of experience altogether as something multiple, subjective and existing only through interpretation. Stoller (2009) argues however that these philosophies are complementary because both offer a critique of experience - with phenomenology concerned with the interpretation of experience by subjects and poststructuralism concerned with the discursive conditions of experience. Indeed, in Ahmed's work on happiness, this can be seen both the ways in which happiness discourses are reproduced as normative, 'as already attributed as being tasteful, as enjoyable to those with good taste' (Ahmed, 2010b, p.34) but also happiness as affectively experienced in the body through 'the comfort of repetition, of following lines that have been given in advance' (*ibid*, p.48). Berggren (2014) also indicates how Ahmed's work on 'sticky masculinity' can help unpack both how bodies becoming

culturally read as 'men' and how these discourses are always contested and unstable. Thus in Ahmed's reading, bodies and the discursive are always co-implicated.

However, the phenomenological aspects of Ahmed's work, while it results in a productive analytical style and is informed by a poststructuralist focus on the discursive, unstable nature of experience, clashes with feminist new-materialist ontology – particularly the notion that phenomena can be understood as separate from the social-material-discursive. Yet I suspect Ahmed finds such theoretical clashes productive. Indeed, she is critical of the stabilising and reifying gestures to name texts (and their authors) as definitively poststructural or new-materialist and questions the authorities on which such theoretical claims lie and the exclusions enacted by such boundary making (Ahmed, 1998). Indeed, while feminism is seen as a humanistic politics 'committed to emancipation, agency and rights' it is also 'pulled by the postmodern to the very critique of the onto-theological nature of such beliefs' (Ahmed, 1998, p.23). Ahmed asks instead that feminists speak back to categorisations e.g. of the poststructural, rather than speak only about their relationship to it. This position relates to my earlier argument as to why I selected feminist theorists as an attempt to speak back to, rather than grid on to masculine hegemonic theorisations. Therefore these clashes between phenomenology and poststructuralism in Ahmed's work are given the potential to be productive rather than reductive and allow us to 'speak back' to theory through close and critical reading of texts and data.

In summary, Ahmed allows me to consider how critical thinking's affects circulate, settle and are entangled with the world and its relations. Specifically, she offers a powerful articulation of how the circularity of affect reproduces normative discourses of what it means to *be* and *do* critical and *who* constitutes a legitimate critical voice. This leads me to questions about how the affects of being critical are produced through social relations, how the repetition of practices reproduces the right to be a critical body in normative ways, who has the right to be critical and about what? Methodologically, her work raises questions about the routinisation of gestures through the social and she provides tools to consider what (and who) gets stuck behind or within critical thinking as an institutional, social and discursive concept. However, I find Barad's work opens up deeper questions about how critical bodies are produced intra-actively through the world and how they can be conceptualised as a process of *becoming*.

4.3 KAREN BARAD

According to Barad (2007) the world is made up of phenomena, which are entanglements of the social-material-discursive. Critical of the 'excessive power granted to language to determine what is real' (*ibid*, p.133), Barad wrestles matter (or the stuff of things) forward for conceptual space, pushing against the centrality and dominance of the human within social research. This is not a rejection of the discursive (as discussed above) although it often appears that way, for example in her infamous quotation that 'language has been granted too much power' (Barad, 2003, p.801). Instead, the discursive and material operate on the same ontological plane and are mutually constitutive of one another, as Jackson and Mazzei (2012) describe:

This brings us to a place as researchers of considering how these constructions and interactions are not just about bodies, nor just about words but about the mutual production of both subjectivities and performative enactments. (p.111)

While the above claim could be shared by poststructuralist thinkers (e.g. it has parallels with Butler's theory of performativity), for Barad this is not *just* about how discursive performance produces speech acts but *also* how subjectivity can be understood as a set of linkages and connections with other things and other bodies. Indeed, Barad's emphasis is not on the rejection of the discursive or the privileging of the material but about how the two are mutually constitutive. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) exemplify Barad's theory of the social-material-discursive in relation to the black female body, which is simultaneously materially constituted (e.g. as a non-essentialised raced/gendered body) as well as produced via discursive constructions of race/gender (what ideas about race come to us through language). In this example, material and discursive cannot be separated or reducible to each other but are 'entangled to produce something other than what would be produced singularly' (p.12).

Barad's is also a deeply performative as well as material philosophy, a focus on *becoming*, where phenomena do not pre-exist but emerge through intra-action, defined as:

The mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual 'interaction', which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction. (Barad, 2007, p.22)

Intra-action reconfigures a post-representational world, where a separation between the world and its objects and what we know of it, becomes intangible. For example in Morley's (2015) analysis of research quality in higher education:

It is not that there are no separations or differentiations, but that they only exist within relations, in co-production. For example research quality emerges or recedes depending on how it intra-acts with a range of constituents including dominant policy discourses, its financial value, methodological paradigms, the

status of the researcher/higher education institution and the key performance indicators in audit cultures. (p.3)

Research quality's discursive meaning (e.g. how ideas about research quality emerge through language) is inseparable from its materiality (e.g. its financial value and its ability to produce researchers as valuable/less), which are co-entangled with other ontologies, epistemologies and belief systems about 'research'. *Intra*-action, as opposed to *inter*-action recognises that what research quality *is* does not precede or exist independently (nor are research, researchers and context distinct or separate) but subject and object, matter and meaning are entangled and emerge together.

Similarly, for Barad, affect is also an entangled phenomenon, rather than simply either a product of bodily experience and/or discursive repetition. Affects are not stand-alone things but come to be spoken of through a relationship with an apparatus or optic of knowing. Consequently, Rutherford (2013) argues that Baradian analyses of affect would focus less on what particular affects *are* but where it comes from, what it does and what kind of analytical apparatus are entangled with it. For example, a student's feelings about becoming critical cannot be isolated as a specific result of doing critical thinking but come to be, and are inseparable from, their specific embodiment, their histories and experiences with educational, or the location within which criticality takes place, such as through specific disciplinary pedagogies - notions explored in [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#). Researching affect using feminist new-materialist provocations is therefore about addressing what forces work together to produce a specific feeling or 'affective intensity' and what such affects produce or do (Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p. 772).

Furthermore, Barad calls her work 'agential realism', to account for the ways matter has a specific vibrancy, a capability to affect and be affected, calling into question dualisms between nature/culture and subjects/objects. The point is not to cross off distinctions and differences but to 'understand the materialising effects of particular ways of drawing boundaries between humans and nonhumans' (Barad, 2012b, p.31). Using this analysis Barad makes an important political point about how 'nature' as stable and ordered is used to justify queer bodies as 'unnatural'. She exemplifies this using nature's queer performances (Barad, 2012b), for example multi-cellular organisms, which challenge what is distinct about individuality.

Furthermore for Barad, agency is not something someone has or does (and is accordingly not limited to human subjects) but is a relationship of possibility:

Agency is 'doing' or 'being' in its intra-activity. It is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices...through the dynamics of intra-activity. (Barad, 2012b, p.31)

The notion of the 'agency' of inanimate objects is neatly exemplified by Bennett's (2011) work on the power of the hoard, which analyses reality TV shows about people who collect items to the extent that it takes over their homes and lives. She describes how the:

Things with which [hoarders] live and that live with them in close proximity are less possessions ... than pieces of self (no-page).

'Things' can have a specific vitality (or agency) in shaping (and becoming part of) individual subjectivities. The agentic vibrancy of the 'hoard' is also simultaneously saturated in social/discursive norms about what the right amount of materiality is e.g. where hoarding can be seen as a sign of neglect in discourses of adult self-care. The hoard therefore represents a specific social-material-discursive phenomenon, which dynamically intra-acts with (and is inseparable from) individual self-hood.

What characterises Barad's work apart from the re-invigoration of the world of the material, is her radical rethinking of how boundaries of what we *are*, what we *know* and *how* we know get produced with the vibrancy of our world as an entangled becoming of material-social-discursive practices. Methodologically, Barad's work is helpful in building on the feminist notion that research is partial and situated. According to Barad, because phenomena are so entangled, any act of observation such as social research, involves making a cut between what is included and excluded from view. This is referred to as 'agential cuts', which effect a separation between component parts of phenomena (the cause and effect). This does not mark: 'an absolute separation but a cutting together/apart – a 'holding together' of the disparate itself' (Barad, 2010, p.265). What this means is that research is a continual process of boundary marking and that what we see and how we interpret it is always interlinked and co-constituted. A crucial agential cut is the optics or apparatus used to design and conduct research:

Apparatus are the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering: they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering. (Barad, 2007, p.148)

Knowing is shaped through these boundary making practices and specific apparatus/optics. It is this flow, this attention to boundary making/breaking that compels me towards what can be, for non-scientists, a conceptually difficult philosophy. Barad's work leads me to explore what critical thinking as an entangled phenomenon of knowledge practices *does* as it is produced by and circulates through the different

apparatus/optics of higher education. For example, how do students intra-act with the materiality of the world in ways that produce different enactments of critical thinking.

Furthermore, Barad's notion of *onto-epistemology* accounts for how there is nothing exterior to what we study and how subject, object and apparatus of research are always-already entangled to produce what can be known. She states that:

Epistemology, ontology, and ethics are inseparable. Matters of fact, matters of concern, and matters of care are shot through with one another. (Barad, 2010, para.39)

Claims for objectivity are about enacting agential separability from the research object. However Barad claims that, not only is it not possible to take ourselves out of the research entanglement, but it is undesirable and unethical because we obtain knowledge precisely because we are *part* of the world, rather than *apart* from it. Barad specifically outlines a feminist ethics for research and for critical thinking that takes account of how researchers are entangled in unequal relations in the social-material-discursive and implicated in the co-constitution of knowledge in different ways:

Critique is all too often...a destructive practice meant to dismiss, to turn aside, to put someone or something down—another scholar, another feminist, a discipline, an approach, et cetera. This is a practice of negativity that I think is about subtraction, distancing and othering... what I propose is...a method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. (Barad, 2012b, paras.4-5)

The first part of this quotation, of criticality understood as deconstruction, becomes particularly relevant to [Chapter 7](#) as students articulate the difficulties of embodying a negative, killjoy criticality. Furthermore, [Chapter 9](#) analyses how neoliberal enactments of subjectivity position critical thinking as an individualised, neutralised practice and how this can be challenged through methodological thinking about the interconnectedness of critical thinkers with their context. The second part of the quotation relates to Barad's 'diffractive methodology'. This can be understood as both the notion of reading patterns, connections and clashes in data in order to be attentive to differences but also about trying not to see research objects as static and instead being attentive to how data get produced through the researcher and their reading of the research encounter. Indeed, analysis becomes a practice of knowing that 'participates in re-configuring the world' (Barad, 2007, p.91). For example, as [Chapter 5](#) details, my

methodological approach recognises how 'data' get produced in the *doing* of work and that as a researcher I am embedded within my research practice and research objects.

Barad's claims about the social-material-discursive, intra-action, affect and non-human agency can be difficult to grasp abstractly yet the traditional sequencing of thesis data into theory followed by application makes such explanation stylistically tricky. However, the following note from my observation of the academic student cohort helps ground why her thinking is so valuable to the specific questions I intend to explore.

You can really feel the weather turning. It's cold outside and the heating hasn't quite kicked in. It feels early - earlier than 9am normally feels. Only 8 students come so far and sit themselves slightly apart from each other in pairs. A few yawn. I notice that groups have started to form - I saw a few students yesterday across campus walking together - they are making friends and they sit together as friends. I don't want to interrupt this, to make people feels I'm imposing - that I've come to the party late. I made a decision to change where I sit each time - both to capture different groups and conversations but also to avoid a certain space becoming 'that's where Emily sits' and people as a consequence avoiding it, knowing that something different is happening in that space.

In this account, both the weather and the position of the researcher body in the classroom space can be understood as having a particular force (or vitality) in shaping the research encounter. Thus Barad's work on the vibrancy of matter allows me to make visible the materiality of space/place and bodies in my analysis of criticality. Using this approach, the classroom space and the weather are not mere 'context', nor are they distinct from the bodies in the room, but these materialities emerge with and through the research encounter alongside the more discursive elements of speech and text enacted by me the researcher. Together they *intra-act* to construct both the research encounter and critical thinking as a concept.

Barad's work allows me to account for how critical thinking's discourses, relations and affects materialise through different apparatus, bodies, moments and locations - how they come to be and what they *do*, not just what they are. By employing a Baradian analysis, critical thinking can be explored not as a fixed or knowable 'thing' but a more complex set of entangled social-material-discursive factors. For example, like Morley's (2015) analysis of 'research quality' what it means to be critical is reliant on the mutual constitution of intra-acting material-discursive factors including students and their embodiments and histories, their intra-actions with other bodies, institutional cultures and norms, pedagogical practices, intellectual histories and epistemologies and dominant policy concern. Thus critical thinking is an accumulated practice that is sustained in and enacted through the material worlds it brings forth. This challenges its historicised

position as a fixed and knowable practice of 'reasoned' bodies engaged in cognitive battling and instead offers new philosophical imaginaries that recognise both the situated place of the human within practices of thinking and that the human might not be the only, or the most important, force at work.

4.4 USING BARAD/AHMED TOGETHER

Both Barad and Ahmed offer important feminist intellectual contributions in thinking deeply about how practices and concepts become routinised, and the concurrent creation of boundaries and exclusions. Yet because they work from different onto-epistemological perspectives, this produces specific clashes, some of which have been rehearsed in the literature (Ahmed, 2008, Davis, 2009, Barad, 2012a, Ahmed, 2014b). While a separate thesis could stretch out the complexities of their different theoretical locations, here I attempt to summarise some of the main differences in their conceptual vocabularies.

In particular, Barad and Ahmed appear to differ firstly in their relative positioning of the conceptual importance of materiality in relation to language, with Barad emphasising the primacy of the former, as well debating the notion that a focus on materiality in feminist research is 'new'. For example, Ahmed justifiably critiques feminist new-materialism for its failure to position itself within existing feminist engagements with the material. Secondly, Barad's feminist philosophy of science and Ahmed's social and cultural studies differ in their substantive and disciplinary focus, leading to a third conceptual clash in relation to their levels of engagement with what critical thinking *is* and should be *for*. Finally, they differ ontologically, exemplified in their readings of affect, with Barad conceptualising affect as a relationship of entanglement of social-material-discursive and Ahmed understanding affect as being produced through lived experience and discursive repetition. However, the spirit of both their work invites theories to 'speak back' (Ahmed, 1998) to each other, read texts together 'for patterns of differences that make a difference' and to identify connections and clashes (Barad, 2007, para.2). While it is difficult to bring these two theorists into conversation, I think it has generative potential. In particular, Ahmed and Barad's differing intellectual contributions have been put to work specifically in relation to critical thinking's affective intensities, as I have discussed previously in Danvers (2015). This section is not an attempt to reconcile their differences but to recognise that more than one lens might be required in thinking about the complexity of the relations, affects, bodies and materialities that constitute critical thinking.

Firstly, Ahmed (2008) is critical of the gesture of 'newness' in feminist new-materialist thinking, positing that feminist and poststructuralist theory has always been deeply engaged with the body. Indeed, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) make a similar point in relation to notions of materiality employed in both Butler and Foucault's work. Ahmed particularly explores the politics behind the gesture of newness as being a 'gift' to the feminist field, which creates boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, as well as feelings of gratitude, which may be misplaced. For example, in claiming a 'return to matter' this implies a 'forgetting' (of prior feminist engagement with materiality) as well as a 'caricature' (of existing feminist work as *only* engaged with language and the discursive) (p.36). Ahmed argues that culture (meaning here language and the social and discursive realms collectively) gets positioned as the symbolic opposite of matter and nature. Consequently she wonders whether feminist work is better focused on the 'complexity of the relationship between materiality and culture' (2008 p.33) rather than engaging in binaried arguments about the relative place of materiality in relation to the social or discursive realms. Indeed, Ahmed wonders whether there is the potential for matter to become a fetish object that is reified, at the expense of analyses that recognise its entanglement with the social and discursive. In response, Davis (2009) states that Ahmed's critique of the bio-phobia of some aspects of feminism is based on the separability of the social and material, whereas 'new' materialism argues that they are entangled. As Lenz-Taguchi (2013) argues, attributing some degree of agency to matter is what differentiates 'new' material feminisms from 'renewed' materialist accounts.

However, Ahmed's recent work (2014a) beautifully details the vibrancy of materiality through, for example, a short essay on affect as an atmosphere:

When feelings become atmospheric, we can catch the feeling simply by walking into a room. In describing an atmosphere, or in becoming conscious of an atmosphere, we give this influence some form. (Ahmed, 2014a, no-page)

Here, the focus is on social relations and their ability to produce and be produced by affective atmospheres, thus exploring the intimately entangled relationship between materiality and social relations. This has parallels with Barad's work on the role of the non-human in shaping human activity:

Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers. (Barad, 2012a, no-page)

While Barad's work more directly engages with the nature of non-human agency, Ahmed's analysis also appears to call into account how human activity can be affected by the materiality of an atmosphere – as something not merely 'chemical' but how affects

also create atmospheres and how atmospheres can be simultaneously affected in return. Indeed, challenging the taken for granted, nudging the human away from its all too comfortable position and destabilising essentialist understandings of what it means to be human is what unites both Ahmed and Barad's theoretical disruptions. Yet unlike Barad, Ahmed's work is less about focusing on philosophical questions of matter's relative position *vis-a-vis* discourse but exploring the micro-politics of the everyday - matter included.

A second clear difference between Barad and Ahmed is their different theoretical traditions affecting the accessibility/relevance of their analytical tools to sociological analyses of higher education. Ahmed, from cultural studies, who focuses on the centrality of how the queer, raced, classed and gendered body is produced by, and interacts with, the world and its texts feels more directly applicable to sociological analysis of criticality's discourses compared to Barad, from theoretical physics, who looks more abstractly at quantum theory's contribution to feminist science studies. Their different foci, as well as my own intellectual history (as a sociologist with a humanities background), meant that Ahmed's work initially felt easier to apply to my data 'texts' than Barad's. For example, critical thinking was often described as '*what makes us human*' (Camille, Interview – I), which made it conceptually very difficult *not* to prioritise the body and social relations. This was also affected by my use of traditional qualitative research design, as [Chapter 5](#) outlines, which initially prioritised the words of others as 'data'. However, Barad's (2003) claim that 'language has been granted too much power' (p.801) remains important as a provocation to reinvigorate work on materiality in the social sciences and humanities. In educational settings, this allows consideration of the role of spaces and places, the stuff of things – particularly digital technology – (e.g. Gourlay, 2014) and the material world around us. Such topics may not be new (indeed complexity theory offers similar promises) but an approach that brings them to the foreground and accounts for their 'thing power' (Bennett, 2004, no-page) opens up intellectually exciting imaginaries for social research.

Barad and Ahmed do engage in direct debate over the definition and role of criticality. Barad (2012a) claims her students can 'spit out a critique with the push of a button' because critical thinking is conceptualised as a disembodied and deconstructive technology. Instead she asks us to engage in criticality differently via 'respectful, detailed, ethical engagements' (para.2). Ahmed (2014b) responds to Barad's frustration with her students' surface performances of critical thinking by saying:

I doubt very much that critiquing whiteness is something students have learnt to spit out. In fact, much of what needs critiquing still seems to go unnoticed. (para.10)

What matters to Ahmed is not simply what critique *is*, but where it is put to work. Ahmed's philosophy of criticality is named as being explicitly political (rather than the arguably less troublesome 'ethical'), engaging in discursive disruption and re-imagining of how inequality is marked on the queer body. While Ahmed wishes to reclaim deconstruction (or being a killjoy) as a productive philosophy, rather than Barad who rejects it in favour of more ethical approaches to critique, both Ahmed and Barad are united in their call for a feminist inspired critical thinking that recognises how being critical is embodied and entangled in the world.

A related concern about feminist new-material philosophies is the nature of engagement with political (or ethical) questions around claiming or rejecting subjectivity. Braidotti (1996) argues that a materialist ontology provides political and conceptual space for those who have, thus far, not 'profited from the entitlements of subjectivity' (p.310) e.g. women, black and minority ethnic, non- Western and disabled bodies. Similarly Barad states that:

Recognising that there is not this kind of localisation or particular characterisation of the human subject is the first step in taking account of power imbalances, not an undoing of it. (Barad, 2012b, para.14)

However, Fox and Alldred (2013) argue that important questions remain whether this 'inevitably separates sociology from struggles of people for...emancipatory identity positions' (p.783). For example, while new-materialist feminist philosophies are intellectually exciting, something feels troubling in this current political context of higher education. Taken in their crudest form, understanding education as an entanglement of the social-material-discursive is perhaps politically convenient in relation to neoliberal discourses of post-equality where attention can be drawn away from the micro-politics of everyday inequalities to abstract understandings of the impersonal and organic flow of the social world. There is, for example, compelling evidence that the material and discursive consequences of embodying certain identities within the academy are still noteworthy, for example, Phipps and Young's (2013) work on lad cultures in higher education suggests that there are spatial and physical penalties for being a female student.

I therefore share Ahmed's (2013) concern that the hope invested in terms such as entanglement or the assemblage is troubling if it produces a context in which categories

such as race or gender become associated with intellectual stagnation and are seen as representing 'passé' or reified identity categories. Furthermore, conceptualising the importance of 'things' feels at odds with philosophies of education that are opposed to consumerist discourses of knowledge where 'people' are being replaced by 'product', particularly when current feminist philosophies of materiality appear separate to Marxist engagements with the material as understood in economic terms. That a feminist new-materialist response to, for example, the privatisation of education feels out of reach is possibly likely a limit of my own imagination. There is certainly the *potential* in Barad's work, for example, to look at educational practices as social-material-discursive as well as to focus on the reproduction of inequality by becoming 'attentive to what gets excluded as well as what comes to matter' (Barad, 2012a, para.9). For example, this has been accomplished in a sophisticated manner in Morley's (2015) work where she exposes the intra-active production of gendered inequality through the concept of research quality.

Finally, Ahmed and Barad also have slightly different ontological foci in relation to ideas about affect. As described above, for Ahmed affects are produced both through lived experiences of bodies in the social and through gestures that become routinised in the discursive. For Barad, affect is not a stand-alone 'feeling' that can be attributed to the discursive or social or human realms of experience but a relationship that emerges *through* the entanglement of the social-material-discursive. That said there are similarities too. Ahmed's reading of affect as circulation through bodies also takes account of how subjectivities emerge through complex relationships. For example, Ahmed (2012) argues that racialised bodies emerge through the simultaneous circulation of language, which is transported by histories of race/colonialism and is also shaped by the circulation of bodies in the social. In such an analysis, it is difficult to pick out the temporality of whether discourse or materiality or the human comes first or is prioritised and in this reading they appear to operate on a shared analytical plane – as Barad also claims. Thus while ontologically Barad and Ahmed differ (in relation to the relationships between the material/discursive), epistemologically (if indeed, they can be separated as Barad raises), they have similarities. Both employ anti-representationalist methodologies, both discuss how research and knowing is performative and partial and both are concerned with advancing feminist theorisations of difference. Thought together, Barad and Ahmed unpack the micro-political challenges involved in becoming critical in higher education and how critical thinking is a relation of entanglement with the material-social-discursive.

4.5 CONCLUSION - SUMMARY OF PROVOCATIONS GUIDING THE RESEARCH

This chapter has described a number of theoretical ideas, emerging from feminism, poststructuralism and new-materialism that inform my analysis. These ideas do not all neatly slot together to produce a definitive philosophical canon of how to do critical, 'post', feminist research but instead generate a set of provocations, principles and questions guiding my research. My critical, feminist, sociological project requires attending to the complex social relations, discourses and material practices within higher education, with a specific focus on addressing the micro-politics of inequality. It is not simply that I look for gendered patterns within that data on critical thinking but it is also about an approach to research that is sensitive to power and aims to *trouble* taken for granted pedagogical concepts. Here I question what such concepts presume and legitimatise about the different bodies that enact them. Consequently, I turned specifically to theorists who identify as feminist, specifically Barad and Ahmed, for thinking about how gendered discourses of power constitute and regulate what counts as valid knowledge and knowers in higher education.

I often feel I have given myself unnecessary difficulty in employing contradictory onto-epistemological perspectives. However, I felt it was important to be attentive to a key emergent debate within feminist thinking, between material and discursive positionings. Indeed this was not a 'decision' but something that emerged through the doing of research and by being attentive to the generative potential of thinking in multiple theoretical directions. Some comfort is provided by Jackson and Mazzei (2012) who use the notion of thinking *with* data to illustrate the proliferation of ways that meaning is made, the multi-layered processes of analysis, as well as the emergent possibilities that come from 'plugging in' theory with research data. The use of 'with' theory rather than 'about' is testament to how research, including the journey to develop a theoretical framework, is not separate from the researcher but is co-produced in its doing – conflicts and contradictions included. Secondly, rather than assuming a separate stage of data collection followed by theoretical interrogation, thinking *with* recognises how data collection, analysis and the researcher are co-implicated in producing what becomes my thesis story. The following chapter will explore how these ethical, political and onto-epistemological challenges have been incorporated in the research design and analytical frame.

5. A FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCHING CRITICAL THINKING

My theoretical framework continually developed before, during and after data collection, aligning with Dunne *et al.* (2005) who define methodology as 'dynamic, contingent, dialogic and context specific' (p.166). Shifts in my theoretical leanings, particularly towards feminist new-materialist theorisations, presented challenges for my methodological decision-making, which this chapter will deconstruct. Firstly I describe how the research was conducted and with whom, and my reasons for selecting the research site and participants. I then consider the theoretical opportunities and challenges underpinning the use of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and a focus group. While ethical concerns permeated my methodological decision-making, I experienced one specific dilemma of my getting on with one cohort of participants better than the other. This interpersonal dilemma is used to exemplify how research is 'entangled in complex affective and political rationalities' and how 'affect and researcher positionality permeate the research process at every stage' (Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p.772).

5.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research explored the following questions:

- 1. How is critical thinking defined?**
 - a) What is the genealogy of the term?
 - b) What are its cognitive, social, political, ethical and emotional aspects?
- 2. How do diverse groups of students e.g. by discipline, social characteristics and previous educational experiences engage with the concept of critical thinking?**
 - a) What expectations do students have about critical thinking?
 - b) How do students express the impact of critical thinking on their lives and learning?
 - c) How are students' understandings re/shaped by different contexts (e.g. institutional, disciplinary) different structures (e.g. gender, class and race) and pedagogical relations and practices?

[Appendix 1](#) maps these questions to the research design, inspired by Mason's (1996) qualitative research guide. Research questions are intended to act as structural foundations for research and, while forming these was useful in narrowing and defining the project, I found their significance waned as I adopted a more organic approach of

‘following around’ the concept of critical thinking theoretically and analytically. What this attends to is how research is not a hierarchical or procedural *doing* but a temporary *engagement* with a specific set of complexities that are shaped together to produce an account. As a consequence of the theoretical framework outlined in [Chapter 4](#) and my detailed research questions, specifically the focus on multiple and contextual understandings and the role of students’ experiences, I became interested in exploring the depth and complexities of the social-material-discursive world through a qualitative frame.

5.2 METHODS

Qualitative methodology provided a way to explore student’s interpretations and enactments of critical thinking at university, and the social, political, material and discursive context in which this took place. MacLure (2011) described qualitative research as being in *ruins* in that, despite post-enlightenment critiques recognising the provisional and partial nature of truth, it is ‘hard to escape interpretive mastery and narrative coherence’ (p.998) when doing empirical work. Thus while my research design follows a fairly traditional pattern of speaking to and observing people and writing about what they say and do, I am also challenged by feminist new-materialist and poststructuralist theoretical questions about the centrality of the human ‘voice’ to become shaped as empirical ‘data’. Yet while I challenged myself to decentre the human and re-centre the material in my analysis (such as by considering the entanglement of human activity with the social-material-discursive) this emerged later in the doctoral journey, as an analytical strategy, rather than being incorporated into my research design from the beginning. Consequently, I take, from Jackson and Mazzei (2012), the notion of working *within* the limits of such empirical practices while continuing to examine the ‘something else’ (p.ix). This constitutes a refusal to present ‘voices’ unproblematically and an analytic manoeuvre to see the ‘constitution and emergence’ (p.ix) of data, rather than their simplistic capture, selection and representation.

Within this (all too problematic) qualitative frame, however, a variety of methods have been implemented in order to grasp at the complexities of the socio-material-discursive world, as experienced by the research participants. Barad (2007) states that because phenomena are entangled together, any act of research involves making a cut between what is included and excluded from view. For example, the apparatus we use (such as different methods) become boundary-making practices that differently constitute the nature of phenomena. Interviews, for example, constitute quite a narrow interaction of

what a participant verbalises about critical thinking at a specific moment – whereas participantish observation allows a different (no less temporal and bounded) frame on which to view students' critical practices. Using multiple methods was an attempt to play with these boundaries and with how meaning gets made as an 'on going performance of the world in its differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility' (*ibid*, p.149). Using multiple methods was also an attempt to be flexible and responsive, characteristics of research that Letherby (2003) connects as being central to feminist methodologies. More prosaically, it allowed me to work with my participants in different settings, configurations and relationships. For example, I could shape my interview questions around relevant pedagogical moments taken from the observation. This allowed me some flexibility in how the topics developed, allowing the research to be context sensitive and adaptive to the contingencies that developed as the academic term unfolded. Furthermore, although I was still a relative stranger, the participants and I shared moments of familiarity through the classroom observations e.g. students referring to *our* class or the book *we're* reading. While I discuss some of the difficulties of building rapport in [Section 5.7](#), this could have been significant for some, in making them more comfortable in the intimacy of the one-to-one interview.

The research participants came from two disciplines - one academic and the other a professional social science - and I conducted participantish, loosely structured observation of a compulsory class for each cohort from October-December 2013. Semi-structured interviews of fifteen students (seven from the academic and eight from the professional cohort) were conducted in October and November 2013, with a follow-up focus group with four students (two from each cohort) in May 2014. These various research encounters intended to explore students' initial engagements with, and responses to, practices of critical thinking at university and their reflections on the role of critical thinking in their lives and futures. While it was not envisioned as an ethnographic project, I found methodological literature about ethnography (e.g. Skeggs, 1994, Atkinson *et al.*, 2001) productive for thinking through recurrent methodological 'stuck places' (Lather, 2001, p.478) such as the complexities of researcher positionality, what constitutes data and the permeability of the boundaries that are drawn around research objects. In so doing, I saw myself developing an ethnographic sensibility; in particular attentiveness to the way 'data' get produced in the doing of research. The following sections outline each aspect of my research design in turn – both in its practical implementation and in the possibilities and challenges it offered in relation to my epistemic and ontological concerns.

5.3 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACE

This research site is a campus university, set on the outskirts of a city in a rural location in the Southern England and founded in the 1960s, as part of the expansion of British universities stemming from the 1963 Robbins Report. It was chosen as an example of a research-intensive university, which as a consequence of national policy, has engaged with both widening-participation and internationalisation.

Gieryn (2000) states that understanding a place sociologically involves analysis of how geographic location, material form and place as a site of meaning and value interact with each other. For example, place has a specific significance in shaping pedagogies and practices of critical thinking. As [Chapter 6](#) and [9](#) will discuss, the institutional adoption of neoliberal discourses of critical thinking as a skill, appeared to clash with notions of critical thinking as a political and intellectual philosophy. This may have specific relevance to the institution's history of student radicalism, as well as to modern-day student protests, which are signified through posters and banners adorning campus buildings.

Initially, I named the institution but halfway through decided to anonymise it. This was because the addition of a focus group 'muddled' promises of confidentiality. Wiles *et al.* (2008) discuss how confidentiality requires 'presenting findings in ways that ensure individuals cannot be identified, chiefly through anonymisation' (p.417). Consequently, because the focus group included students from both cohorts, the anonymised disciplines - and key people including the course lecturers became identifiable to those taking part. Anonymising the institution and the selected subject disciplines constituted an added layer of privacy but it did not guarantee true anonymity either because, for example, I became reliant on research participants' willing to keep identifying information between focus group participants. However the silences produced through the practices of anonymisation mean that contextual issues - such as the institution's reputation for student radicalism - cannot be deeply explored. These debates reflect Kaiser's (2009) concern that qualitative researchers face a 'unique, and often ambiguous, ethical dilemma' between 'conveying detailed, accurate accounts of the social world' and protecting research participants (p.1641). At the same time, the presumption that a place can be *known* because it is *named* fails to address how the intra-action of social-material-discursive practices that comprise an institution are always shifting and cannot be fully captured or understood. Indeed, research itself has a temporality in being a snapshot and

reification of a place in a particular moment in time. Thus to 'name' could be seen as trying to 'fix'.

While critical thinking as a concept is the research focus, rather than the institution itself, concept and context are intimately entangled such that place comes to have a significance as part of the social-material-discursive context constituting higher education's pedagogies and practices. However, I tend to refer more generically to 'context' in my analysis because I felt stifled by my decision to anonymise and the limits this placed on my describing the significance of the 'local'.

5.4 CHOOSING FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Within the selected institution, I chose to work with first-year students because they are important *foci* of research into student learning in higher education (Harvey & Drew, 2006, Yorke & Longden, 2008), for reasons described below. I especially wanted to demonstrate how critical, insightful and intelligent first-year students are, as a challenge to both notions of learnification, which tend to infantilise students and position lecturers in *loco parentis* and to discourses of students as consumers, with an instrumental focus on credit accumulation.

The first-year experience has received specific research attention in relation to predicting retention and achievement outcomes; investigating individual, social and institutional factors impacting on performance; designing support for learning transitions in the first-year including induction and guidance on pedagogical techniques for enhancing first-year learner behaviour (literature summarised by Harvey & Drew, 2006). The first-year is seen as being particularly important due to the significant changes experienced by students being assimilated into the academic and social practices of the academy (including developing criticality). Indeed, Schilling (2001) suggests that strategies and learning behaviour adopted in the first-year remain with students throughout their undergraduate experiences. Additionally, Harvey and Drew (2006) argue that first-year induction support - including information on academic-skills and competencies - is a significant part of the package to promote student retention. Therefore if critical thinking is distinct and valued academic capital then perhaps first-year students could reflect on what this intellectual 'transition' feels like and what internal and external factors impact upon successful critical assimilation into the academy. However, it is important to also recognise that because first-year students are not a homogeneous category, students' have embodied and therefore differential first-year experiences. This has been analysed in relation to the intersectional impacts of

social class (Reay *et al.*, 2001, Archer *et al.*, 2003), age (Stevenson and Clegg, 2012) gender (Reay, 2003, Warin & Dempster, 2007), race (Reay *et al.*, 2001) and (dis)ability (Gibson, 2012) upon students' early engagements in higher education.

Speaking to first-year students was also intended to challenge some of the deficit discourses about university undergraduates and the norms embedded in the classification of students as immature *learners* or instrumental *consumers*. For example, institutional research and resources to see 'what works' for delivering successful first-year experiences are motivated by a desire for students to stay, engage and succeed (Andrews *et al.*, 2012). However, this focus on success can result in performative measures that mean students are required to *demonstrate* transition, engagement or learning has taken place, for example through attendance monitoring, first-year experience surveys and personal development planning. Holmes (2004) calls this *learnerism*, which emphasises the need for students to be 'publicly seen to be learning' (p.627) through institutional recording and measurement of student learning and engagement. This transformation of learning from a private to a public performance, Macfarlane (2014) argues, negatively impacts students rights to be free to learn as autonomous adults. Such pedagogic notions of learnerism are also difference-blind and do not account for students' differently embodied engagements with the pedagogies of higher education, as David and Clegg (2008) discuss. Furthermore, the notion of student as consumers also provides a limited vocabulary to understand first-year students and their learning experiences. For example, Williams (2013) discusses how, in such a 'market' context, lecturers avoid intellectually or emotionally challenging content so as not to create dissatisfaction amongst student 'consumers'. Understanding first-year students and their early engagements with critical thinking was therefore intended as a way to examine, and challenge, the impact of consumer and learnerist discourses and account for the complexity of ways students were engaging in critical learning practices in higher education.

5.5. CHOOSING THE DISCIPLINES

The research focused on two cohorts of first-year social science students from an academic and a professional discipline. Note that I do not name them. My first foray into ethics told me that a 'good' researcher who wishes to gain ethical approval keeps her secrets. However, as I later describe the different disciplinary knowledge practices, the disciplines feel painfully recognisable, at least to me. While naming might provide comfort in allowing researcher and readers to feel they now know what these disciplines

are *really like*; just as I critique representationalism in [Chapter 4](#)– the notion of direct translation between what we see and what we know – this act of anonymity similarly recognises the space between assumptions and our (situated and partial) experiences.

I also recognise that the terms ‘academic’ and ‘professional’ are crude, especially given that vocational subjects continue to strive for intellectual legitimacy in relation to more traditional academic subjects. Indeed, hierarchies of knowledge in the academy that name such courses as ‘professional’ or ‘vocational’ are highly gendered. For example, male-dominated Engineering is rarely named as ‘vocational’, but female-dominated Social Work is. Furthermore, the rise of discourses of student employability mean professional skills and competencies also permeate more traditional academic higher education pedagogies. The professional subject’s focus on critically interrogating research can be characterised as ‘academic’, just as the academic subject’s class on time-management could be seen as ‘professional’. The boundaries therefore become blurred and the names should be seen as labels, rather than as descriptions. This supports my assertion, using Barad (2007) that agential cuts make researchers see and think in distinct categorical, and thus hierarchical, ways.

I chose two disciplines because I was interested in how the discourses of critical thinking intra-acted with different optics of knowledge in higher education. I felt that choosing very different disciplines, for example, Engineering and English would allow me to engage only in crude comparisons. Instead, I chose similar social science subjects as a way to focus less on disciplinary difference and more on the subtle micro-politics of how the discourse of critical thinking operates. However, the division between academic and professional was intentional because I was interested in the specific divisions between vocational and non-vocational subjects and whether these ends influence the construction of different apparatus of knowledge production. For example, Mitchell *et al.* (2004) studied critical thinking amongst Social Work and Modern Language students and found the former were highly competent and practiced in linking formal knowledge and professional practice through reflective assignments but struggled to link this to theory, whereas the Modern Language students were encouraged to be critical of theory from an early stage, though this was rarely linked to practice. Furthermore, Macfarlane (2014) argues that vocational subjects and their emphasis on developing workplace behaviours and values are linked with the rise of student performativity. This can be seen, for example, in the prevalence of reflective writing, which seeks authenticity but at the same time is structured through a very specific (and assessed) performance of ‘reflection’. This has parallels with the instrumental approach to critical thinking,

described in [Chapter 1](#), that I experienced when working with students and it will be interesting to see whether vocational and academic students engage with critical knowledge practices differently, as a result of such performative demands.

Both disciplines were of a similar size and with similar demographic profiles. The professional discipline had a cohort of forty-five in 2013-14 with 16% male and 84% female and the academic cohort of forty-six were 17% male and 83% female. 64% of the professional students were over twenty-one at the start of their course compared to 13% of students in the academic course. 98% of the professional students were from the UK or Europe compared to 87% of the academic students. 16% of the professional cohort were first-generation compared to 37% of the academic cohort. Thus both shared a predominantly British and female cohort but the professional course had a higher proportion of mature students.

5.6 GATHERING INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Being situated in student classrooms as a researcher made access to interview participants more straightforward and, after introducing my research to each class, I sent an email to the whole cohort requesting interview participants. With this, I included a basic demographic survey ([Appendix 5](#)) to capture something of what students are like to ensure, if I had an influx of volunteers for interview, I had some demographic data from which to construct a crude sampling strategy. In the end ten students came forward voluntarily and the rest I approached individually. Although I was not intentionally aiming for 'representativeness', nor do I see such categorisation as a 'stand-in' for certain identities, it nonetheless felt important to me that a range of perspectives were gathered - perhaps to hint to the possible impacts of different histories, experiences and embodiments.

Table 1 maps the interview participants' social and demographic characteristics, gathered through the recruitment questionnaire detailed in [Appendix 5](#). However, I experienced tensions over how to present and describe my participants. My theoretical attempt to de-centre the human from the centre of my analysis and avoid the 'representational trap' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p.vii) of trying to figure out *who my participants are*, potentially conflicts with the desire to make participants 'knowable' through describing their characteristics or character 'up front'. Indeed, I considered providing cameos of my participants but decided not to for the following reasons:

Firstly, as I started to write them I felt I was caricaturing the participants in ways that were not particularly analytically useful. I was mindful of trying to avoid impressionistic accounts. For example in describing Ellie I wrote: *'She was blonde and pretty and a really gregarious character in the class – always speaking up and asking questions – everyone seemed to be her friend. She came from a middle-class family of journalists and had spent some time living and working abroad before she returned to study'*. However, it is not the cameo itself that is useful but the act of writing a cameo. It reveals something about the value judgements and agential cuts (Barad, 2007) I make as a researcher – notions which I discuss in [Section 5.2](#). Furthermore, while it became clear from my description the way I felt about each participant and consequently the affective and iterative nature of research processes, I already exemplify the ways I felt differently about each cohort in [Section 5.11](#). Thus as an analytical strategy it does not allow me to say anything different and also leads to the creation of 'characters' which do not necessarily represent my participants but only what I can tell of them. This point relates to the concerns raised by the 'post' methodologies I use about the problematics in making participants knowable. For example, Maclure (2010) identifies how representing people's lives in research as 'given' takes a simplistic account of the world. Indeed, it fails to see, as St Pierre (2010) describes, how powerful social and political discourses shape who a participant *gets to be* in a particular research moment.

Secondly, while it may help the reader to imagine something of Ellie's character, this is not a case study project about Ellie but her 'data' are used to exemplify the case of critical thinking. This also reflects some of the concerns about centering the 'human' in post-representationalist work. Thirdly while some of these data (e.g. her parents' occupation) are scattered throughout the thesis I felt that putting it together like this alongside the demographic details could comprise anonymity. Furthermore, because some of this additional description is used throughout the thesis at relevant analytical moments, I do not believe that the additional data would assist my analysis of individual participants in great depth. Finally, I was compiling these cameos based on memory and some of the participants I have not seen for almost 2 years and some I felt I could describe better than others, which raised concerns for me about parity in data presentation.

However, providing some basic details as I do in Table 1 below is intended for the purposes of the reader being able to connect with and access the data, recognising how engaging with research writing can be a difficult, often deeply affective, process of sense-making.

Name	Course	Fee Status	Gender	Ethnicity	Mature	First Gen	Disabled
Becky	Academic	Home	F	White British	No	No	No
Bronwyn	Professional	Home	F	White British	Yes	Yes	No
Bryony	Academic	Home	F	White British	No	Yes	Yes
Camille	Academic	Home	F	White European	No	No	No
Ellie	Professional	Home	F	White British	Yes	Yes	No
Emma	Professional	Home	F	White British	No	Yes	Yes
Jodie	Professional	Home	F	White British	Yes	Yes	No
Joseph	Professional	International	M	Black African	Yes	Yes	No
Carly	Academic	Home	F	White British	No	No	No
Kate	Professional	Home	F	White British	Yes	Yes	No
Leo	Professional	Home	M	White British	No	No	No
Monique	Academic	Home	F	Black British	No	Yes	No
Rob	Academic	Home	M	White British	No	Yes	No

Teresa	Professional	Home	F	White European	No	No	No
Tobias	Academic	Home	M	Black British	No	Yes	No

Table 1: Interview Participants' Demographic Information

A detailed comparison of how the participants' characteristics as a sample relate to their cohort as a whole can be found in [Appendix 2](#). However to summarise, in the professional cohort the numbers of home/international, male/female and under/over twenty-one I interviewed closely reflected numbers in the whole cohort. In the academic cohort I interviewed less mature students and no international students, despite the latter representing 13% of the academic student cohort. In both groups, first-generation students were slightly over-represented. In [Chapter 8](#) I also problematise some issues with categorising and measuring 'difference'. For example, I discuss how the binary of male and female was challenged in relation to the inclusion of a trans student. Furthermore, while the first-generation category is often used as a proxy for social class in higher education, in actuality it resulted in a homogenising account of the diverse economic and social factors affecting participants' educational histories.

5.7 A FEMINIST INTERVIEW

The selected participants described above were interviewed in October and November 2013. Interviews are a common tool used in educational research enabling participants to voice their interpretations of the world and express how they regard situations from their own perspective (Cohen *et al.*, 2011a). Yet Clegg and Stevenson (2013) argue that, despite the ubiquitous use of the interview method in higher education research, it still remains 'under-theorised and misdescribed' (p. 5). Challenging the neutrality of the interview setting recognises, for example, that it does not produce a naturalistic representation of people's lives. Instead interview texts come to be through the interaction between the interviewee, the interviewer and the interview space. In this, I am inspired by Skeggs *et al.*'s (2008) work on the construction, rather than capturing of data through the social science interview. Here the interview is not a neutral space but creates the *condition of possibility*. For example, interview participants can be shaped by happiness discourses of wanting to please and give information they think the interviewer wants to hear. Thus, the intimacy of sitting across from a relative stranger

and being asked to tell/listen to a story can produce awkward feelings in both parties - particularly of needing to fill the silence.

There are also considerable power dynamics as, while the researcher has considerable control in shaping the interaction itself and what stories are told from the research, they are also vulnerable to what the interviewee will reveal. Letherby (2003) acknowledges that while researchers often have the objective balance of power during the research, in practice, power is complex and shifting. Furthermore, power can be being understood ambivalently with participants not necessarily feeling powered/disempowered (or even that the research methods are distinctly 'feminist'). These issues also intersect with the multiple identities of the interviewer and interviewee. For example, Bhopal (2010) describes how her shared ethnicity and gender, when interviewing other Asian women, encouraged respondents to open-up and trust to be established. Yet the boundaries of this 'shared culture' were always in flux, particularly as she simultaneously inhabited the identity of a middle-class academic. Indeed, Skeggs *et al.* (2008) describe how their middle-class women interview participants were more comfortable speaking to a researcher than working-class women, as a consequence of feeling a sense of shared habitus. This is testament to the complex social locations structuring what can be spoken and heard in a specific interview context.

Interviews are also particularly prevalent in feminist research committed to collecting and representing untold stories and experiences. According to Oakley (1981), feminist interviewing must have:

All the warmth and personality exchange of a conversation, with the clarity and guidelines of scientific searching. (pp.32-33)

Thus, as far as possible, feminist interviews should be flexible, non-hierarchical, non-exploitative and based on a relationship of trust and intimacy. As well as representing suggested interviewing techniques; the notion of a 'feminist' interview also attempts to reflexively take account of the challenges and contradictions of speaking and being heard. For example Oakley (1981) challenged existing notions of the interviewer as being distanced and objective arguing that instead of the pretence of neutrality, feminists should conceptualise the interview as a dialogic encounter between those with shared interests. Consequently, I approached the interview setting with such feminist principles including the desire to build rapport and to engage in reflexive interviewing, which involves a willingness to share personal information and interests. For example, I started our conversations informally by trying to find common ground e.g. *I studied this subject at university too, I remember it all feeling so new; have you done the preparation for class*

yet, I haven't, I'm not sure what to write; I recognise your accent, I grew up near there. I also positioned the interview as a safe space by emphasising how much I valued their time and contributions and explained how and why I would use their stories in my work.

Yet while rapport gets positioned as a 'good thing' in feminist interviewing, it can be problematic. Finch (1984) describes how the intimacy of the feminist interview can transgress boundaries between research and friendship and between knowledge construction and therapy. She also describes the ethical implications of creating a comfortable environment in that the participants may reveal, through feeling relaxed in the conversation, issues they consider to be private and not part of 'official' data. Stacey (1988) also states how forms of close relationship building favoured by feminist researchers acts as a considerable imposition and intervention into the lives of others which is fundamentally exploitative due to the desire for the researcher to get 'good' data (and to build their sociological careers) from such rapport.

Furthermore, while rapport is described as a two-way process, the researcher predominantly judges when it feels good for them, that is, when respondents appear to act in the way they desire. Although there are clues such as the ease in which the conversation flows and reciprocated smiles, rapport is also felt subjectively and is particularly difficult to sense among relative strangers. At times, I felt exhausted by the emotional labour of rapport, particularly when interviewing those who I found more difficult to get on with. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I felt the conversation flowed better with the mature female students with whom I had more in common. There was even one participant I disliked (and such an admission feels troubling for a feminist researcher, intent on mutually respectful dialogue but equally aware of the need to debunk feminist research as the texts of supra-ethical beings). In the interviews, I was witness to intimate and difficult personal stories that ostensibly had little to do with critical thinking. Yet I also faced monosyllabic responses, awkward silences and quizzical looks - sometimes in the same interview - challenging notions of rapport building as neutral, simplistic or permanent 'good feeling' but experienced instead as clumsy and affectively loaded.

In unpacking this I am inspired by Hey's (2001) work on the messiness of rapport, how it is 'fragile' and 'always on the edge of destabilising' (p.163) and made up of 'processes of connection, disconnection, break, rupture and re-connection' (p.164). Most often, the interview felt like a happy space, at least for me - but certainly not a neutral one. Interview settings are infused with such problematics such that interview data should be

examined for their properties both as accounts and interactions. Consequently, working within the *ruins* (MacLure, 2011) of qualitative research challenges researchers to:

Question what we ask of data as told by participants, question what we hear and how we hear (our own privilege and authority in listening and telling) and deconstruct why one story is told and not another. (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p.ix)

Therefore the analysis of my interviews recognises that what is told is partial, incomplete and produced through the specific apparatus of the interview setting.

The fifteen individual interviews were scheduled in the first few weeks of term in October, with some in early November. I asked participants where they wanted to meet and the majority of interviews took place in a meeting room on campus, with one in the Library, with the discussion lasting around an hour. Clegg and Stevenson (2013) identify how holding an interview on campus frames the interview in a particular way whereby the student retains their student/learner identity. We settled on a location at the university mostly for privacy and convenience but while this no doubt had such an effect, students' learner identities were what I was particularly interested in exploring. Although I had a list of questions (see [Appendix 3](#)), the interviews were semi-structured which enabled me to be flexible and explore topics in more detail where relevant. The questions were focused around students' initial thoughts about university study; their understandings of critical thinking; how they were taught to be critical; what being critical felt like and their views on how it related to their studies, wider lives and futures.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. In the spirit of mutual openness, participants were sent a copy and amendments were invited. Most students responded with a brief thank-you and two added comments and clarifications. In Joseph's interview the tape recorder broke and, while I wrote comprehensive notes quickly after the discussion and emailed this to him for clarification, I never heard back. Initially I was concerned about whether this represented 'real' data. Yet, as my research and theoretical thinking progressed, I realised that recorded interview data are similarly partial and constructed; that there is nothing truly 'authentic' about social interaction and that memory and recorded data are both performative. Finally, I also asked interview participants to choose their pseudonym and for those who did not respond, I informed them of the name I chose. This was also intended as a way to allow students to feel invested in the research project, as well as an additional responsibility for me to be conscious of how I wrote about students' lives and identities. This aligns with De Vault and Gross (2011) who argue that feminist researchers should be responsible for, and

sensitive to, the dynamics of *how* we represent others, *who* has the power to represent others and the *implications* of our representations on the lives of others.

5.8 OBSERVATION AS A SOCIO-MATERIAL PRACTICE

In addition to the interviews, I conducted classroom observation to move beyond students' self-report, understand the pedagogical context students are working within and explore critical thinking as a social-material-discursive practice reliant on 'multifarious capillaries of associations and action' (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013, p.37) of texts, materials and bodies.

I took a loosely structured approach by being open to the data that presents themselves but using some guiding themes to attempt to deal with the complexities of observation in terms of selectivity. These themes included the pedagogical, social, moral and political discourses of critical thinking and how different students interacted with the class and these ideas. I positioned myself mostly as a participant (hence *participantish*) as, although I clearly stated my role as a researcher, I took part in the class as a student, where possible and where appropriate. My 'data' comprised a research diary, which for the most part I wrote during class when others took notes or, if the session was activity based, shortly after. Because classrooms are highly ordered spaces with specific norms and behaviours, I tended to follow students' lead and wrote when they wrote. I initially planned to write only about the classroom itself but my writing, inspired by my developing ethnographic sensibility, soon expanded to cover discussions in coffee breaks, interactions around campus, methodological ramblings and a personal reflection on the process of doing a PhD. These writings became testament to how 'affect and researcher subjectivity' permeated the research process at every stage' (Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p.772).

From October-December 2013, I observed the academic and professional students in two core modules related to critical thinking. I sought ethical approval from the lecturers and the module leaders and explained my work to the class, giving opportunity for those who did not wish to take part to be excluded from my analysis. This would not mean they would be excluded from my gaze and judgement if they remained in the classroom but I respected their right not to be formally represented. Furthermore, because there were multiple groups for each cohort, it would have been possible to observe an alternative class if students expressed concerns and wished to opt-out.

The academic module was core for all forty-six first-year students, delivered only in the first-term (October-December) and specifically dedicated to critical reading and writing. It was designed and taught by a female academic, Kathryn, who had research interests in social justice and inequalities and was highly committed to her students and conscientious about teaching and support. The module was taught via weekly one and a half-hour workshops to small groups of around fifteen students, with Kathryn teaching the same session three times. There were ten classes in total, with two weeks given aside for individual tutorials and I observed twenty-one sessions, including watching the same class delivered more than once.

The professional module was also core for all forty-five first-year students. This ran for two terms and in two distinct parts but I only observed the first-part from October-May. The module offered an introduction to professional competencies such as observation and ethics, academic-skills such as referencing, reflection and group dynamics and the complexities of studying people and their identities. The last lecture and seminar of term was dedicated specifically to critical thinking (although this was referred to in the overall module outcomes). The module was taught fortnightly via a one-hour and twenty-minute lecture for the whole group of forty-five followed by a one-hour and ten minute seminar with approximately ten students. In weeks where there wasn't a lecture, students had independent e-learning tasks and directed reading. There were two lecturers (Jo and Judy) and two seminar lecturers (Jo and Ana) - all female academic staff with broad research interests in social justice, alternative pedagogies and inequalities. I observed five out of six lectures (I missed one because the lecturer Judy felt uncomfortable with me observing, as discussed below) and all six seminars, where I stayed with the same group throughout.

McLeod and Thompson (2009) acknowledge that the position of the participant observer is always 'ambiguous', encapsulating a 'tension between distance and immersion, objectivity and subjectivity' (p.83). Consequently, I refer to my observation as 'participantish' to account for the multiple, shifting roles and identities I occupied in the classroom. I was in *place* as a student - given that I sat behind a desk in the same room with them- yet I was in a continual process of being *placed* in different ways, as in the following field-note taken from the academic module describes:

My observation is a performance. I feel nervous. I cannot just sit back and listen or be a passive observer. I feel that I have to set an impression – as an older student, more experienced in studying and in understanding the subject, I feel like I need to display a certain expertise. Also as a (former) teacher I am conscious of wanting the

class to run smoothly so I contribute perhaps more than I should. For example, after students give their weekly presentations I always say something – a comment or a complement. I'm attempting to offer supportive feedback because I want to, because I genuinely think they've done a good job. Yet I also know from teaching that students' need a bit of encouragement and that speaking in front of people is quite a big deal. A couple of other students say something but it is always me. I'm trying to think whether I would do this in a normal session as a normal student. I think I probably would... Even so, I am conscious of being on a tightrope between good student, good teacher and good researcher. Such a bloody good girl! At the same time as a researcher, I'm conscious of feeling too invisible – feeling as if I'm just 'one of them'. In the interviews with these students they'd often talk to me as a fellow student about the class we're doing or the book we're reading. Yet I can see a couple of them looking as I write notes. One asks 'what are you writing?' My presence hasn't been forgotten.

Here I move between moments of recognition/misrecognition – worrying whether I am too much a researcher/teacher/student, or not enough. In one academic class a student who turned up late and who had missed my introduction, mistook me for a student and said '*this is so boring, how long does this go on for?*' Thus who you think you are in a classroom is often temporal, subjective and messy and I found myself as Mason (1996) suggests, managing multiple identities and moving between a variety of roles.

The subjective meaning of observation also cannot be divorced from the social-material-discursive - and political - context in which it takes place. For example, I enter one professional class I am due to observe and I did not recognise the lecturer Judy. I introduced my research and she seemed anxious and flustered at the thought of me observing. My gut feeling was to leave and she instantly looked relieved. I was frustrated because my observations had been formally agreed with the course leader Jo, but perhaps the message had not been passed on or had got lost. Later Judy emailed me:

Sorry I wasn't really happy for you to observe that session – with a bit of reflection I realised that actually it would have been better if you had. I can only explain that in addition to being observed for the first time in a tutor role, I also learned this week that I am to have a whole load of overseas student and their lecturers visiting one of my lectures later this week. It was not negotiated with me and I must be honest, I would not have chosen it as I am a newbie lecturer and in the early stages of developing my teaching skills. So, yet another observer felt like a step too far. It wouldn't have made much of a difference in reality so I am sorry that I responded instinctively rather than sensibly!

The honesty of her response reveals something about how educational observation, cannot be easily divorced from evaluation and judgement, particularly with the circulation of neoliberal vocabularies of measurement, standards and excellence that

surround university teaching (Ball, 2012). According to Morley (2015) the 'evaluative gaze' (p.13) of the audit society is not a neutral one but works to produce 'winners' and 'losers' in higher education teaching and research, leading to a deep sense of precarity in academic life. Observing was therefore not simply a neutral act of doing, seeing and writing but was entangled with the multiple arrangements of people, place and politics that comprises an institution and was affectively loaded, as Judy describes.

I am also inspired by Jones *et al.*'s (2010) analogy of observation as a *montage*, something created to tell a story about an event, rather than a complete record of the event itself. Though the content this montage relies on is not purely fictional, the way I construct it and the myriad of ways the context is shaped by the people, pedagogy and place means that it is, at best, partial. Atkinson and Coffey (2002) describe how observation is always social. This means that researchers are embedded within the process of observation as it takes place in the social world and so need to be reflexive about how they position themselves and their claims to truth. It also means that observation is performative, as opposed to allowing unfiltered access to 'reality', in that it relies on spoken and unspoken discourses of for example, how to behave in the higher education classroom, and that these discourses consequently shape how the event comes into being. However, saying the observation is social or a montage does not mean that it has nothing to say. For example, the strong emotions students associated with critical thinking (explored in [Chapter 7](#)) reveal something about the lack of affective language to speak about critique, other than it being a disassociated, cognitive act. Yet I would not claim that I had privileged access these emotions, other than through what was represented to me visually and textually.

5.9 FINISHING OFF? THE FOCUS GROUP

I initially planned to interview students at the beginning and end of their first-year at university, with the classroom observations included as a way to gather participants. Yet these observation encounters became so rich that a second set of interviews was replaced by a focus group discussion. Focus groups typically comprise of six to eight people participating in a structured or unstructured discussion. Madriz (2000) describes their usefulness as a feminist method that is sensitive to power and minimises the role of the researcher, is flexible in allowing participants to decide the content and direction of the discussion and provides the opportunity to listen to others as agents of knowledge, particularly when they are marginalised voices demanding to be heard. However they are not unproblematic. The dynamics of focus group discussion can mean some

individuals are more vocal, while others are silenced and, while Flick (2009) argues that their interactive nature is more naturalistic, they remain a specifically constructed site of possibility for speech. Furthermore, they raise ethical concerns over whether they are a 'safe' space to share. While consent forms (see [Appendix 6](#)) stated that information discussed in the group would remain confidential amongst participants, this cannot be guaranteed by the researcher.

Nonetheless I felt the focus group to be a different and productive space or 'apparatus' in which to discuss critical thinking collectively and to compare responses from both cohorts. All interview participants were invited to attend. Although several agreed in principle, only four students arrived, two from each cohort and we met in May 2014 for two hours. The group started with some initial questions from me about how students' critical thinking has developed during their first-year at university. This was followed by a discussion of four examples of women engaging in public acts of critical thinking with problematic consequences that I shared with the group, detailed in [Appendix 4](#). The wording for each was taken from a summary of news sources about the events. For example:

At the final of a debating competition at Glasgow University, two students, Rebecca Meredith from Cambridge University and Marlina Valles from Edinburgh University were subjected to sexist heckling. Comments from the crowd included 'what qualifications does a woman possibly have to be here' and 'shame on women'. When a female student in the crowd confronted one of the hecklers, she was called a 'frigid bitch'. Rebecca Meredith was told that it was 'to be expected' that women would be booed. When she asked racial minority speakers would be treated in the same way, I was told 'they would be booed too, but we don't have them here'.

The case studies were selected to explore some of the potential difficulties of being publically critical, which students raised in the interviews. It was also an attempt to seek new apparatus to speak about 'difference' and to unpack the neutral embodiment of the critical thinker as classed, raced and gendered. Along with the interview and observation data, this was used together to represent a multi-layered apparatus for exploring students' engagements with critical thinking in their first-year at university,

5.10 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

My methodological thinking prompted reflections on how my researcher identity consciously and unconsciously shaped the stories I tell about my research. Attending to such reflexivity forms a key aspect of feminist sensibility because it closes:

The illusory gap between researcher and researched and between the knower and what is known offering an important challenge to researcher objectivity. (Etherington, 2004, p.32)

As with most PhDs, there is something in there about me. From worries about speaking out as 'showing-off' or being 'above my station' to teenage concerns that being a girl who is too clever or opinionated would not get me a boyfriend; and to everyday worries that my ideas would not be good enough – becoming critical for me is similarly paved with excitements and insecurities. Furthermore, as a young, white woman from a lower middle-class background, I embody a gendered, raced and classed identity space that creates certain conditions of possibility for data collection and analysis. More specifically, as a PhD researcher and as someone with experience in teaching critical thinking, it could be that the participants will see me as someone who is the gatekeeper and/or validator of what critical thinking is and should be. These aspects highlight the power and positionality inherent in what I can know of my researcher identity and how this might potentially shape the stories I tell. This is fundamentally about politicising the personal and thus shifting its relevance from the merely autobiographical to the social and material aspects of researching.

Yet reflexivity makes me uncomfortable. It often becomes a performance of *who I am and what I know*, because a fully authentic view of our psyche and our social location can only ever be partial and momentary. Indeed, as Clegg (2000) describes, reflexivity should not be unproblematised but instead understood as a 'complex craft' (p.456). Furthermore, while I recognise the important role of *me the researcher* in shaping the thesis project, I do not want my thesis to be 'swamped' in 'interminable self analysis and disclosure' (Finlay, 2002, p.209). While I recognise that I make a number of conscious and unconscious agential cuts in the research, it is not possible to lay testament to all the ways I do so – particularly in a neat section containing 'feelings' or 'biases'. Instead I try to weave my personality and thinking, using the first-person, throughout my thesis and exemplifying with relevant reflections to illustrate my role in co-constituting data.

5.11 RESEARCH ETHICS

The research adhered to the British Education Research Association *Code of Ethics* (BERA, 2011) and was approved by the University of Sussex research ethics committee in June 2013. Interview and focus group participants were informed about the nature of the project via an information sheet and consent form (see [Appendix 6](#)) and were allowed to withdraw their consent to take part in the research at any point before the commencement of data analysis. Furthermore, in the interview and focus group space,

participants were informed that if they share anything private it will not leave the room, other than under my duty of care to inform if it relates to a fear of harm for others or themselves. Observation participants were also fully informed via an information sheet and by an introduction to the research in the class. However, because the observation was less focused on individual students' contributions and identities but more on pedagogies and interactions, consent was given by lecturers with students able to opt-out. I also took appropriate steps to protect the participants' confidentiality, through anonymising their identities through using pseudonyms, changing any key identifying information and storing their data confidentially, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1988).

Yet adherence to the guidelines was only part of my ethical decision-making and a feminist analysis recognises that ethical considerations are always highly complex (Maynard & Purvis, 1994, Letherby, 2003). For example, although undergraduates are not defined as a vulnerable group by BERA, they do have vulnerabilities, which the interviews could have potentially exposed and provoked. This could be as a consequence of their unfamiliarity with the methods of data collection, with me, or with the topic, which had the potential to explore sensitive issues about students' critical engagement with their learning, emotions and the world around them. For example, in the interviews students did reveal intimate personal stories to me - of marriage difficulties, troubling childhoods and worries about their futures. McRobbie (1982) articulates the difficulties of emotional research arguing that it can feel as if she is 'holidaying on people's misery' (p.5) and then leaving the participants with the consequences. To mediate these concerns, in all the consent forms participants were pre-informed that these 'emotional' questions formed part of the research, that they did not have to answer them if they felt uncomfortable and that this will not affect their participation in the overall project. I also contacted interview and focus group participants after our meeting with a personalised de-brief email pointing to sources of study support with critical thinking and my research blog in case they want to follow the research in development. In some cases, this email included links to sources of pastoral support such as counselling, depending on the topics raised in the discussion.

Furthermore, as a researcher, I recognise that my own emotions are also tied up in the project, which I dedicate several years of my life to. Potentially, this interconnectedness of emotions and research can be stimulating. Katz-Rothman (1986) writes 'I could not have understood it intellectually, if I had not experienced it emotionally' (p.5). That said, the equation of feminist research with emotion work is not straightforward and it is not

a burden that should be accepted gratuitously. Therefore, I drew on my supervisors and colleagues for support as well as reflecting on these issues in my observation notes, which became akin to a research journal.

Participants were not unfairly or over-advantaged as a result of taking part in the research. However, the nature of their participation may have affected their understanding of the topic. For example, by being asked to articulate how they feel about critical thinking they may be more open to thinking about critical thinking than their peers not engaged in the research. Indeed, many interview participants after I stopped the formal interview, spent some time talking to me about what critical thinking was, as if seeking my advice and approval. For example, after a conversation like this at the end of our interview Jodie states:

Talking about what critical thinking is, now I've said that I can do it, I think I did it anyway, I just never realised that I was doing it. (I)

Students could therefore have experienced a potential pedagogical advantage of taking part by being specifically asked to focus on what critical thinking is and its relevance to their studies. Furthermore, while there was also not an explicit objective that my research will 'empower' my participants - as there is a complex relationship between critical thinking and empowerment as well as between research and empowerment - students did describe their engagement positively. For example, Bronwyn reflects:

When you were asking questions. I think in a way it was the first time that I was actually really asked to think quite deeply about what I thought about it and what my understanding of it was. So I actually was quite enlightened by it to be honest. (FG).

I consider it to be a positive thing if my research offered a productive space for students to think about their critical learning. However, I am also conscious that these 'happy tales' do not necessarily represent *all* participants' reactions to the research. Indeed, this came from 1 of the 4 students who volunteered for the second stage of the focus group, representing a greater level of engagement with the project. It could be that some students did not enjoy the research or were nonplussed by it, tales that they are unlikely to openly reveal to me the researcher.

One further ethical concern or 'hot spot' in the data was that of feeling closer to one cohort more than another - exemplified in the following observation notes:

Kathryn asks for mid-module feedback and we all took a few minutes to reflect on what we found enjoyable and what we'd like improved. Although a fellow student handed a post-it to me I was hesitant about whether to fill it in. I found it really

difficult to say something negative about the class as I know how hard she works and I genuinely don't know what I'd do differently. (Academic Observation - AO)

It is a huge room, I'm sitting at the back, I don't recognise people's faces, and I only know a few names. I don't feel part of it. I feel like an observer. (Professional Observation - PO)

In the academic example I felt myself being caught up as Taylor (2013) calls it, in the *allure* of the classroom, whereas in the professional example my short sentences and repetition of the negative 'don't' highlights my feelings of frustration. It was bound to be the case that I would find different things in each cohort – I just did not expect to *feel* so different about them. This potentially had ethical implications in the way I interpreted and interacted with data from both cohorts. Mason (1996) claims it is 'unrealistic to assume you can maintain a completely neutral stance in the development of relationships' (p.64) and urges researchers to be openly reflexive about their research interactions. Though I'd initially put these different observation experiences down to my own naiveté as a researcher, it also says something about how research, and ethical frameworks are shaped by these unpredictable affective exchanges.

While taking time away from the data took me away from the intensity of these feelings about doing research with different cohorts, my interpretation and analysis was no doubt affected by these complex affective exchanges of liking/disliking and belonging/unbelonging. For example, I ended up having coffee with the academic lecturer Kathryn most weeks in a break between the lectures. This meant that I had opportunities to talk more about the teaching I observed and the research topic and process, making me feel even closer to that cohort. These conversations subsequently became 'data', testifying to the complex nature of what constituted the research object and the difficulties of promising ethical certainties from the beginning of a project. Indeed I had to discuss with Kathryn whether she was happy for me to include these informal chats within the research and sent sections to her for approval, which made me feel, as Stacey (1988) and Finch (1984) describe, as if I was exploiting our friendship for my research. This is further testament to how research design, analysis and ethical decision making are made and unmade through the multiple affective process that constitute doing research.

5.12 DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis is often understood as a distinct process of stepping outside and interpreting data to generate themes and categories to render data meaningful. Yet this does not account for the:

Affective inter-, and intra-subjective nature of qualitative research, from the co-creation of 'data' to the ways in which qualitative analysis is an on-going practice, entangled in all aspects of the research process. (Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p.772)

Because the research was planned in several stages I had time in between to reflect on what I found and what this could mean. My thoughts were shaped and reshaped by the development of my theoretical framework and by time spent thinking *with* data (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Data constitution and analysis are thus always on going and shaped by the entanglement of the researcher within their specific social-material-discursive arrangements.

Data analysis felt particularly troubling for me because of the gap between the technologies of thematic coding offered by analysis guides and the intensely affective and fluid sense of analysis in which I felt my ideas generating. For example, interview data were transcribed and imported into Nvivo and themes were generated in which to organise the data. While theoretically that was my initial analysis 'done', it felt empty - with analysis as technical categorisation almost narrowing and instrumentalising my thinking. Consequently, I went back to the interviews, listened again and re-read the transcripts and wrote individual notes and summaries for each and then pulled everything together again. For the focus group transcripts I took a similar approach of initial coding then further re-reading, listening and summarising. For the observation, after typing up my reflective notes in an attempt to bring a semblance of order to my scribbles, I did the same. This slow and deep thinking was much more productive and in combination with data organisation offered by Nvivo and thematic coding allowed my data to be 'pummelled and pulverised into submission in the analytic cause' (Webb, 2014, p.54). This approach was inspired by MacLure (2013a) who argues that we should not rush for definitive meaning in data analysis but instead seek an approach that slows us down and pays attention to 'hot-spots' in the data, where data glow for the researcher and spark 'fascination or exhilarations, suspense or intensity' (p.173).

Using multiple methods was not a simplistic triangulation strategy. The idea that different methods can be equally patched together to achieve a sense of completeness is based on a construction of the social world, and our access to it, as unproblematic. For example, observation data are no less partial or temporal than any interview transcript and, as Coffey and Atkinson (2002) state, talk and events do not occupy different spheres of meaning. They suggest instead that analysis should emphasise their commonalities in terms of social action and performance and so I attempt to place the observation, interview and focus group data in conversation rather than hierarchical relation. In

practice, bringing data together in conversation took the form of messy, large pieces of paper to cross-reference and link ideas until the outline of my analysis chapters started to become visible. Equally important in my data analysis was writing itself. As St-Pierre (2011) acknowledges 'words become data only when theory acknowledges them as data' (p.621). It was only through theorising what I heard, saw and experienced in my writing, that I could constitute what came into view as data. For example, my interest in feminist new-materialist methodologies occurred mid-way through data collection and intensified as I found myself being sensitive of the reading of 'words' as material in ways I had not anticipated:

I notice that words can have a real effect on the room. For me when I hear the word critical thinking, I perk up, I get ready to write and I feel energised and excited about what comes next. It effects a physical change. Students seem to do the same with the word assessment. (PO)

My emerging feminist new-materialist framework focused my attention on how certain words had a force, pertinence and power over the room that moved beyond the simply discursive and towards something physical and material. While this was intellectually exciting, it blurred and complicated the boundaries of what constituted data and the research object. Thus Jones *et al.*'s (2010) analogy of observation as montage can be helpfully expanded to the research process as a whole, to explain how perspectives shift and comes in and out of view; how this affects what discourses become available to think and speak about data and how data are constructed and produced in the moment of writing.

5.13 CONCLUSION - METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The methodological framework described above is influenced by my developing ethnographic sensibility, which interrogates how data get produced in the *doing* of research, and turns its attention towards deconstructing taken for granted notions of the neutrality of research. Such thinking will now be turned towards the data by examining students' engagements with critical thinking in their complexity in order to 'trouble' this everyday concept in higher education theoretically and methodologically.

In the following four chapters I present my analysis of some the key findings of the research. These are not exhaustive but are formed by being attentive to what glowed as 'hot-spots' (MacLure, 2013a, p.173) in the data, and spending time plugging in my analysis with data and theory. This begins firstly with an exploration of the multiple ways 'critical thinking' was defined.

6. CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT WHAT? FOR WHAT?

Just as there is no *correct* or *unitary* definition of critical thinking in the research literature, students similarly took up the idea of critical thinking in myriad ways. All of the students interviewed subscribed to more than one definition concurrently, even where they appeared to contradict each other - for example, seeing critical thinking as a technique for individual assessment *as well* as for more collective, engaged social responsibility and citizenship. Critical thinking was a 'portable' and 'fluid' notion in that a complex set of attitudes, behaviours and practices ranging from personal self-scrutiny to assessing the world outside the classroom could be attributed as 'critical'.

Students struggled to give a fixed definition, possibly because most were new to the concept, but also because enacting critical thinking created a series of blurred lines - between thinking and voicing critical thinking; between places where critical thinking is the norm and where it feels awkward and between understanding critical thinking in theory and their desires and anxieties for how it may work in practice. In articulating their understandings of critical thinking, students revealed their uncertainties, desires and caveats about it, revealing the inseparability between what critical thinking *is* and *does*. Thus what it means to be critical intra-acts (Barad, 2007) with students' lives and experiences and the educational context in which criticality takes place. The conceptual distinction of *intra-act* recognises that such 'context' is not mere background to critical thinking but is co-constitutive of it. For example, students' regularly described the need to think critically about the *right* things, in the *right* place and with the *right* intensity. These multiple contingencies spanned space and place (whether at home or in the classroom), social relationships (communicating between 'critical' colleagues or 'traditional' family members) and in relation to the topic in hand (the difference between being critical about people or abstract ideas).

In this chapter, [Section 6.1](#) outlines the intra-actions between critical thinking's definitions and enactments. It describes the close link between becoming critical and being a successful student in higher education and how such processes of *becoming* are neither linear nor straightforward. Such a claim highlights a need to analyse the complexity of factors affecting the transition to learning in higher education as being more than a simplistic transformation of capitals (moving from one way of being to another) or cognitive shift (a switch to a new way of thinking) but as something contextual, contingent and embodied. [Section 6.2](#) looks at students' multiple engagements with critical thinking and how these often shifted and clashed, particularly

the supposed incongruity between notions of critical thinking as a technology of assessment and critical thinking for citizenship and social responsibility. This chapter argues that, rather than seeking 'pure' definitions, critical thinking should be understood as an entanglement of social-material-discursive knowledge practices in higher education from which students are inseparable.

This analytical claim is informed by Barad's (2007) work on the entanglement of social-material-discursive practices constituting phenomena such as critical thinking, as well as how becoming a critical thinker is something produced in the *doing* and emerges *through* intra-action. It is also inspired by Fenwick and Edwards (2013), who argue that knowledge practices in higher education, such as critical thinking, are contingent and negotiated processes and consequently that:

While they can appear to be settled, perhaps even immutable, each is...teeming with a myriad of everyday human and material processes, interests and politics. The task is to avoid foreclosing these difficult controversies for the sake of determining what is authoritative 'knowledge'... but to keep them visible and to hold them critically multiple. (p.37)

It is important to state at the outset that I am not standing in judgment of these students and their differing engagements with criticality. Nor is my intention to assess their critical thinking along a binary of correct/incorrect. This assumes a certain authority about my view, which I do not claim. Instead I am trying to keep in touch with how, where and to whom critical thinking flows and settles in the academy.

6.1 DOING/BEING CRITICAL

In the interviews I asked students '*what does critical thinking mean to you?*' This wording was chosen because research discussed in [Chapter 3](#) suggested that, rather than there being a set definition, multiple meanings exist, whereby critical thinking is comparable to a tacit set of practices that intra-acts with students' lives and educational experiences. This was also motivated by a desire to disrupt student performativity, a notion introduced in [Chapter 2](#), which conceptualises learning in higher education as being the fulfilling and neat articulation of set and measurable competencies. Indeed, I did not want students to feel under pressure to possess and verbalise a 'correct' definition, particularly as they had only been studying a few weeks when we first met. In addition to these interview narratives, students' definitions of critical thinking also appeared via my observation of classroom discussions, from both staff and students, and as we discussed students' application of critical thinking to case study scenarios in the focus group.

Within these research encounters, fifteen definitions of critical thinking appeared to circulate. These were (in no particular order):

1. Internalising/psychologising - *'Like thinking critically without thinking. Not consciously doing it'* (Bryony, I).
2. Therapeutic - *'It's beginning to make me a lot more aware of the influences in my past that may influence the way that I act or the way I view certain situations or how I might get gut reactions to certain things'* (Teresa, I).
3. Self-realisation/originality - *'It's kind of like a foundation for your own ideas'* (Rob, I).
4. Ugly-feelings - *'If you are critical of someone it's normally a bit negative'* (Leo, I).
5. Inquisitiveness - *'To gain a deeper understanding I think, and to always be inquisitive, to always look a bit further than you might otherwise'* (Bronwyn, Focus Group - FG).
6. Accepting complexity - *'I think I've learnt that through the term, that sometimes there is no absolute answer. It's very much down to different ways of looking at things'* (Carly, I).
7. Knowledge excavation - *'Thinking more about where and why and what's influenced certain viewpoints and sources and things that you come across in life, rather than just taking them at face value'* (Bryony, I).
8. Evidence-based argumentation - *'I've got to know what you are going to come back at me with so that I can know what to come back at you with'* (Carly, I).
9. Logical reasoning - *'You should follow you head...you should think critically'* (Joseph, I).
10. Informed (knowledge) consumer - *'Like going shopping and weighing up the pros and cons of which one you buy'* (Kate, I).
11. Provocation/playing devil's advocate - *'You have to be sort of like a middle person'* (Jodie, I).
12. Counter-hegemonic/political - *'Most of the time if you are being critical you are going to be opposing the general consensus of what people think'* (Tobias, FG).
13. Citizenship/social responsibility - *'If you do critical thinking at university then you can change and you can help other people do critical thinking and it's like a cycle of bringing change in society'* (Teresa, I).
14. Academic habitus - *'I suppose it felt kind of natural, something you should do when studying X'* (Rob, I).
15. Professional habitus - *'In the profession we're in... nothing is very straightforward and you always have to look at both sides of an argument or both sides of a*

situation and the factors that effect it...you will have to critically think about everything'

(Jodie, I).

The breadth of these definitions exemplifies the deconstructive excess of an apparently 'simple' transparent term. Some definitions could potentially connect - such as ten (informed knowledge consumer) being a consequence of nine (criticality as a logical reasoning) and eleven (being devil's advocate) resulting in six (accepting complexity). Though these fifteen perspectives appear disparate, notions of questioning, of deeper knowledge and of the need to work with different perspectives were uniting themes. These could be broadly grouped into three categories - critical thinking as a cognitive process, directed towards assessment (seven-ten), critical citizenship (eleven-fifteen) and critical thinking for self-betterment and personal development (one-seven). However both fourteen and fifteen (academic and professional habitus) span all three categorisations, involving personal reflection and development, assessment against a set of criteria and being a critical citizen and deserve separate analytical attention.

These findings from students mostly parallel Moore's (2011b) seven definitions of critical thinking by academic staff; as judgment (ten); as a sceptical and provisional view of knowledge (five-seven); as originality (three); as a careful and sensitive reading of text (five, eleven); as rationality (eight-ten); as the adopting of an ethical or activist stance (twelve, thirteen) and critical thinking as self-reflexivity (one-four). That the student and academic staff definitions reveal similar patterns of diverse engagements is pleasing in respect to critical thinking being effectively communicated through higher education pedagogies. However, knowing what critical thinking is in principle does not mean that the expectations for how to do it in practice are clear. Indeed, the data also testifies to considerable confusion by students as to what is expected of them by their lecturers in terms of effectively demonstrating critical thinking. It is also apparent that both academic staff and students feel there could be multiple aspects to critical thinking and that such differences could relate to specific tasks (e.g. critical reading in relation to five and eleven) or disciplinary differences (e.g. fourteen, fifteen).

However, what seems to be missing from Moore's list is present in my data - namely the notion of it being a key part of academic and professional *habitus* (fourteen, fifteen) - a process of becoming socialised into a 'natural' student or professional in order to succeed in higher education or professional life. Such processes often relate to hidden curricula - the implicit assumptions expected by authoritative others in order to

demonstrate successful or ideal student - which are often classed, gendered and racialised. This raises two specific issues, firstly about what the key performers indicators of being an ideal critical student were and secondly, how notions of becoming a (critical) student are complex, intra-active processes rather than simplistic transitions.

Like university life and learning more generally, critical thinking is an embodied and contingent experience. This can, for example, make it problematic to separate becoming critical from becoming a student or professional, through developing academic and professional habitus. Bourdieu defines habitus as 'a socialised subjectivity', a form of embodiment that is socially produced and historically and culturally situated that enables a subject to fit within specific social contexts (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002, p.126). Developing student and professional habitus is about learning the rules of the academic/professional game. As Rob indicates in saying '*I suppose it felt kind of natural, something you should do when studying*' - being a critical thinker is about becoming the right kind of student through developing appropriate critical values and behaviours. Monique echoes similar sentiments in saying:

Academic environments enable people to think critically. But I think that's because, that's what you have to do when you are studying. (I)

Her words also highlight the link between the need to fit in academic environments through adopting critical thinking practices and, subsequently, how this reproduces academic environments as critical spaces. This reflects Bailin *et al.* (1999) who discuss critical thinking as a normative enterprise which regulates standards of writing, speech and behaviour in higher education. Furthermore, Pithers and Soden (2000) argue that because of critical thinking's tacit nature, many teachers rely on it emerging as an attribute of 'good' students. This notion is reflected in Rob's use of *should* and Monique's use of *have*.

However, the close intersection of critical thinking with academic and disciplinary socialisation is complicated by the fact that 'fitting-in' as a student in higher education is not accessible to all equally. In her study of racism and belonging in higher education, Ahmed (2012) highlights how embodying the 'right' habitus intersects with inequalities of class, race and gender. Thus who a student *is* and *could be* is continually constructed through public and policy discourse, as well as being rooted in normative ideals of students along classed, gendered, racialised and aged lines. Furthermore, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) explain how New Labour policy discourses (which have not been significantly amended or challenged in this respect in subsequent neoliberal Governments) spoke of 'learners', rather than students, who are:

Active consumers of education services, taking responsibility for their own learning as independent, autonomous and self-directed individuals. The ideal learner of such discourse is based on masculinist conceptions of the individual as male, white middle-class and able-bodied... an individual unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt. (p.599)

These dominant key performance indicators of 'ideal' student are based on traditional Western, masculinist constructions and so shift over time and across geographical location.

For example, Leathwood and Read (2009) consider the global feminisation of the academy in the UK context, whereby the increasing numbers of female students accessing and succeeding in higher education has shifted gendered perceptions of normative student-hood. Despite female numerical successes, [as Section 2.1](#) describes, debates about the feminisation of higher education have been accompanied by concurrent discourses of 'dumbing-down', supporting arguments that when under-represented groups decode the mysteries of access, the product they access becomes devalued (Morley, 2011a). Furthermore, while the 'good' student has perhaps been culturally reimagined as a white, middle-class woman, this embodiment is not universally recognised and rewarded. For example, research with female university students in Ghana and Tanzania (Morley, 2011b) shows how despite this increased global feminine presence, gender inequality is rife and female student identity is continually misrecognised as a consequence of hierarchical and gendered power relations. Transactional sex and sexual harassment was rife in this context and this raised questions about exactly *what* kind of learning environment students were accessing. Similarly, research in the UK on students and lad cultures reveals that everyday academic sexism and sexual harassment of female students by unreconstructed masculinities of some male students is extensive (Phipps & Young, 2013). Becoming and being recognised as a student is therefore more problematic for subordinate groups because the traditional elite - comprised of upper middle-class men - can entrench their power with a consequent 'Othering' of women and working-class, non-heterosexual, disabled and black students in the academy.

The process of becoming a critical student and adapting to the shifting rules of the game is not neutral. For example, it is affected by students' gendered identities, which are simultaneously shaped by surrounding geographical, historical and socio-political contexts. Therefore questions about what critical knowledge practices and behaviours students are socialised into needs to be followed with analyses of whether some students seemingly adapt to these more easily than others. For example, in my research, notions

of being confidently critical were seen to intersect with age and gender, with the consequence that students' critical thinking role models were predominantly masculine. This will be considered further in [Chapter 8](#), along with a detailed exploration of how engagements with critical thinking were structured through other patterns of 'difference', including subject discipline, social class and previous educational experiences.

What is also apparent from the relationship between critical thinking and identity construction is that critical thinking is not simply *done* but it can be an act of becoming that *does* something. While students often spoke about what they thought critical thinking is and should be this was sometimes tied up with other considerations - specifically their concerns about being a successful higher education student. Notions of critical thinking being an act of *becoming* appear to have parallels with Meyer and Land's (2003) work on threshold concepts; conceptual gateways that lead to new understandings that can be both troublesome and transformative. For example, Baxter-Magolda (2006) argues that the intellectual development from 'uncritical acceptance of knowledge' to 'critically constructing one's own perspective is more complex than learning a skills set - it is a transformation of how we think' via crossing a threshold to seeing the world differently (p.50).

For example, in our interview, Becky describes what it means to become a critical thinker:

Like thinking critically without thinking. Not consciously doing it, it'll come naturally. Rather than reading something and thinking 'right I'm going to think critically about this article'. As I'm reading the article, it'll already be happening... like second nature.

Becky is not simply describing *doing* critical thinking but articulating her desires about *becoming* a critical thinker and her hopes that the practices expected of her as a student (e.g. critiquing journal articles) will become 'second nature'. Her definition is about what her critical thinking *should* be, as well as what it *is*. It is also about how this new cognitive process *does* something in becoming part of who she is - as unconscious or 'natural'. The boundaries therefore become blurred between what critical thinking *is*, *could/should* be and *does*, indicating that it is a complex practice that is not easily bounded, with multiple temporalities relating to students' present and future. Furthermore, the notion of critical thinking as a threshold or gateway, as if a portal to a revelatory and unitarily 'good' thing to learn, is complicated by the case of critical thinking, where students struggle with how critical thinking makes them feel about themselves and their futures. For example, Leo,

in articulating the negativity of critical thinking - *if you are critical of someone it's normally a bit negative*' (I) - is revealing something about how critical thinking feels as well as how to do it, suggesting that critical transformation is not a straightforward transition.

Additionally, a threshold assumes that concepts can be neatly boundaried to understand their 'pure' effects. Yet all students positioned critical thinking as a continual '*work in progress*' (Bronwyn, FG), revealing how 'critical' transitions intersect and are mediated by other discourses, such as being a successful student, as Teresa describes:

I want to be a critical thinker. I guess it's one of my goals...Now I'm not but I guess towards the end of the year and towards the end of my undergraduate degree I will be able to. (I)

Similarly, Bryony interprets critical thinking as a process of *becoming*, albeit requiring a short-term shift but with long-term implications:

I think once you learn how to critically think it will just develop rather than change. Your ability to do it without thinking about it will develop. But your brain is not going to change is it? Or the way you see things isn't going to change. It's just the knowledge and the amount that you know about things when you are arguing your point of view or when you are writing something down. But the actual critical thinking, I think once you've learnt the skill - and you don't really have to learn it, someone has to just bring it out of you. I think we do it all the time but then someone just has to remind you. And once you've learnt to do that it is something that will stay with you. (I)

Her account is oxymoronic. While critical thinking on one hand appears very static in that, once learnt, nothing much changes - it also is described as representing a fundamental shift in her way of seeing things. This is perhaps testament to contrary pulls between wishing to describe (and fix) what critical thinking *is* to account for her competence in doing it in the present and allow space for her criticality to develop in future. So while she may have experienced a 'critical' transition, her critical thinking is still mediated through her continually developing engagement with higher education's knowledge practices, her confidence in academic learning and the present and future contexts she finds herself in where such critical thinking might be applied. Using Barad (2007), her critical thinking can be seen understood as a continual and contingent act of *becoming* as student bodies like Bryony's move through different entanglements of the social-material-discursive. This challenges the notion that one simply 'masters' critical thinking, or that it means the same thing across a range of settings.

What is also interesting about Bryony's quote is her revelation that critical thinking is something already inside of you, ready to be drawn out. Yet a gateway assumes a subject

stepping through knowledge practices that are distinct from who they are. In my exploration of critical thinking, students are an inseparable part of the knowledge practices that constitute critical thinking and produce and reproduce notions of criticality through their embodied engagements with it. For example, students' previous experiences of thinking or writing are made materially relevant in becoming a critical thinker through renewed pedagogical emphasis, as in the following response from Camille:

She (Kathryn) was saying about making our own arguments in our essays and I've been doing that, I just never noticed it, it's just like inside me. (I)

Like Bryony, critical thinking was not a linear adoption of a set of external practices or a completely new way of seeing the world but something that was already part of Camille's self/experiences, to be drawn out by her engagements with education. Critical knowledge becomes ontologised such that she cannot imagine *not* knowing. She also describes it as an intrinsically bodily process, rather than simply a cognitive one, in which what it means to *be* critical is a product of multiple factors, including being shaped by the materiality of her embodiment. Thus rather than critical thinking representing a cognitive act by reasoned, detached bodies, it emerges both *through* the web of social, material and discursive knowledge practices that constitute criticality and *with* the different bodies that enact it.

Therefore instead of critical thinking being conceptualised as a linear boundary crossing process or the adoption of set of practices external to individual lives and experiences, critical thinking is akin to a set of entanglement processes that students work within but are inseparable from, as Fenwick and Edwards (2013) claim. Furthermore, because critical thinking is characterised as an entangled set of practices, students can subscribe to more than one understanding of critical thinking at the same time, even if they appear analogous.

6.2 MULTIPLE, OVERLAPPING ENGAGEMENTS

Using the four broad groupings outlined above, **Table 2** maps students' multiple definitions, purposes and directions of critical thinking.

	Cognitive	Citizenship	Self-betterment	Student 'Habitus'
Academic				
Becky	X	X		X
Bryony	X		X	X
Camille		X	X	X
Carly	X		X	X
Monique	X	X	X	X
Tobias	X	X		X
Rob		X	X	X
Professional				
Bronwyn	X	X	X	X
Ellie		X	X	X
Emma	X		X	X
Jodie	X	X	X	X
Joseph	X	X	X	X
Kate		X	X	X
Leo	X	X	X	X
Teresa	X	X	X	X

Table 2: Mapping Students' Multiple Definitions of Critical Thinking

This table reveals how all students engaged with critical thinking in multiple ways and specifically, all mentioned critical thinking in relation to being and becoming a successful student. This is perhaps unsurprising due to our interviews taking place in an academic setting with academic examples providing the most immediate context in which to talk about critical thinking, a consequence anticipated by Clegg and Stevenson (2013). However, these interviews did not represent the sum of individuals' experience of critical thinking and taxonomies and crosses in a box do not do justice to the data subtleties.

For example Tobias' opinion on critical thinking changed from our first interview to the final focus group. Initially, he described critical thinking as a purely cognitive activity related to university life and learning, that he found quite forced. Yet in the focus group he talked about gaining confidence to apply his critical thinking to broader issues:

I do think of myself as a critical thinker. Erm, only with stuff like to do with class though... maybe right now the process of critical thinking is a bit forced. I'm thinking to myself 'right let's critically think now', 'let's do this now'. Maybe as I progress through university it will become more natural, I won't have to think about it, it'll become like second nature or something. (I, October 2013)

I was thinking of using it really specifically in my work and in looking at articles and stuff but... Now I think it is going to help in just life generally. (FG, June 2014)

His critical thinking did not stay static over this eight-month period between our meetings, suggesting that notions of fixed definitions are complicated by these shifting temporalities and via notions of appropriate critical space and place. The table also does not reveal the intensities of engagement. For example, Bronwyn spoke *passionately* of critical thinking in relation to self-betterment and, as a consequence of engaging in personal development, discussed *to a much lesser extent* how this could be replicated in improving the lives of others through critical citizenship and through her professional work.

As Table 2 reveals, there were three students who engaged with all definitions of critical thinking – Joseph, Bronwyn and Monique. Joseph is a slight anomaly as, in our interview, he spoke at length, often erratically, about what critical thinking was - yet the recorder broke, the notes are my own and we had no further contact. However, though I do not have any indication of students' grades, both Bronwyn and Monique mentioned to me that they did very well in their assessments and they also came across as highly conscientious students. Arguably, knowing the multiple ways critical thinking can be understood and performed set students at an advantage. Such a claim resonates with the work of Biesta (2014) who talks about how learning becomes depicted as an act of

continual adaption, whereby learners are duty bound to continue to make and re-make themselves. As [Chapter 9](#) will discuss, notions of intellectual and emotional flexibility form part of idealised notions of neoliberal selfhood, key to succeeding in the knowledge economy of higher education. While further subtleties in the data will be examined in later chapters, the key takeaway message is that students had multiple, rather than singular, engagements with critical thinking.

Two common understandings of critical thinking revealed in Table 2, and in the literature, potentially appear to conflict. These are critical thinking as a cognitive process (often for assessment) and critical citizenship. In the former, students construct a highly instrumental, technologised notion of critical thinking that can be accessed and performed in order for individualised personal and intellectual success. For example, in reflecting on when she has thought critically in her first-year at university, Bronwyn says:

When you are doing things like essays... we're being forced to think so much deeper. You know, you have to in order to fulfil the words and the learning outcomes. (FG)

She equates critical thinking with the technologies of assessment, akin to a tool for academic success. Alternatively, students position critical thinking as something essential for social and personal transformation. For example, Teresa, in reflecting on critical thinking and her future states:

If you do critical thinking at university then you can change and you can help other people do critical thinking and it's like a cycle of bringing change in society. (I)

Here Teresa is describing a cyclical form of critical citizenship towards social change and social responsibility. These differing interpretations also reflect a further overlapping tension between critical thinking as a disembodied technology (something you *do*) or as something that becomes integral to students' sense of self (something you *are*). This then becomes a question of how and where critical thinking is applied as well as the intensity with which students internalise these discourses.

Where critical thinking is about individual self-betterment through academic performance it could clash with the desire to be critical in order to achieve broader social transformation. The former could be crudely characterised as neoliberal self-interest and the latter as more collective, 'political' and socially productive. Yet at the same time Bronwyn's use of the word *forced* indicates that she is aware that being critical is about knowing the rules of the game to succeed in higher education. This enactment of critical thinking could be not only a performed technology but also a form of habitus that is

negotiated, accomplished and felt. Similarly, Teresa paints the relationship between critical thinking and social change as unproblematic, instrumental even, suggesting that critical citizenship can be similarly performative. Because this dynamic of complex and conflictual engagements with critical thinking exists, isolating fixed definitions of critical thinking and interpreting them using binaries of good/bad or performative/political therefore becomes problematic.

Indeed, students did not fall neatly into either seeing critical thinking for assessment or for citizenship and, as detailed above, all appeared to be working within a number of definitions. Teresa, for example, though she articulates a version of critical thinking for citizenship above, states earlier in our interview how she also uses critical thinking strategically to make career decisions as well as to research and write assessments. Similarly, Bronwyn located herself primarily within notions of critique as academic success but also articulates her desire to think critically to change her professional behaviour in order to seek change in the wider social world via her professional practice. Neither student located herself in one fixed position and instead balanced multiple, potentially conflicting, notions. This is where notions of fixed habitus do not map onto the data. Being critical was not just about learning rules but negotiating through a complex entanglement of knowledge practices. These engagements shifted and were often contingent upon the specific contexts such as academic assessments, professional norms and values and social relations. Whilst Probyn's (2004) analysis of shame demonstrates how 'habitus' can be understood as performative, as dynamic and as felt, I am drawn closer to the conceptual tools of those, such as Ahmed (2010b) who broaden my understanding of habitus as lived and felt and how our identities are shaped and reshaped by our affective engagements and social contexts.

For example, in negotiating these multiple and shifting engagements with critical thinking, this sparked tensions that appeared most profoundly at the level of affect. Becky talks about critical thinking predominantly in terms of her course and her assessments and in one observation about her essay states:

I've basically finished...I've just got to put the critical bit in...but we've only got 200 words for that. (AO)

This expression of concern fits within a discourse of critical thinking as a technology of assessment, a skill that can be 'put in' as an afterthought to demonstrate a learning outcome. Yet of course Becky (as well as all the other participants) comes with a context - someone who in our interviews talked about how she was applying critical thinking in everyday life - to the TV shows she watched and the books she read, and I also saw her in

the observations speak very critically about the texts we were reading in class. She later likens critical thinking to an attitude in warning us:

You have to be careful not to just assume the worst in everything, to think about it, to not just let it consume you. (I)

Critical thinking may be a tool for assessment but it is also one that is slowly seeping into Becky's personal life and is something difficult to define and to contain. Her concern to control it reflects the affective tensions involved in working through what critical thinking is, does and could/should be. As Ahmed (2010b) discusses in her theorisation of affect and happy objects, what feels good for us is socially constructed and socially reproduced. Thus Becky's concern about voicing her criticality right and in the right place and space, to not let it *consume* her, suggests that there are complex social contexts that construct when critical thinking feels good.

Indeed, students' multiple definitions were often described as being dependent on time and place, further highlighting the role of both context and contingency. So a more cognitive, technologised understanding would be used in relation to specific assessments and engagements with critical thinking for critical citizenship would be used more abstractly. There was also a sense in which students understood these applications as flowing from one to another, as Bryony and Camille state:

I think it becomes, like a lot of skills you learn, as you are learning to do something you then adapt it to your everyday life. (Bryony, I)

I pay attention a lot more about the people I'm hanging out with or the places I go. And I could make more of the exchanges I have outside of school because I could link them to, I don't know, that class I had about friendship and intimacy... You are able to make those links. (Camille, I)

For Bryony and Camille, critical thinking, once mastered as an academic skill, becomes applicable and transferrable outside of the classroom, allowing them to make connections in their everyday lives. The cognitive, skills discourses around critical thinking are therefore not necessarily limited to successful assessment performances but have the potential for much broader application. Specifically, some students go on to link critical thinking to social betterment:

I'm hoping critical thinking will make it easier, to help me understand why society thinks that way...Erm, I'd like to see it changed. Perhaps I can end up being someone who helps to change that thinking eventually [Pause] it's quite ambitious though. (Kate, I)

While the vocabulary of critical thinking and social protest was not in students' reflections, the sense of contributing to broader social change or to intellectual debates

on topics through critical thinking was important. It was as if critical thinking operated along a continuum - from individualised personal scrutiny to a politics of changing the world. While social protest is often positioned as the gold standard of criticality (as discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), it is important to state that writing, silent reflection and collective discussion can be just as powerfully 'critical'.

And yet something feels uncomfortable about the analogy of continuum because of its linearity and its sense of progress and promise of something better. While all of students did think critically about both themselves and the world around them, they performed this differently:

Possibly other people are as much of a critical thinker but aren't necessarily expressing it. So would we still think of them, would we know they are critical thinkers? Probably not. (Kate, I)

Kate articulates the difference between speaking and thinking critically, emphasising how difficult it can be to capture what critical thinking is and to judge it in relation to someone else's critical thinking without it being verbalised. Similar discussions took place in relation to writing:

I'm probably better at speaking than writing though...to write it down is often harder. And how you incorporate that into an essay is really hard I think... it's a lot of skills that you are trying to put together as one thing. (Bryony, I)

Bryony says she is more confident speaking critically but less confident in writing it. [Chapter 8](#) discusses further the assumptions behind what it means to embody confidently critical, including gendered, racialised and classed notions of 'ideal' student. This also draws on some of the literature on academic literacies introduced in [Chapter 3](#), which describes how the 'ideal' academic writer is not neutrally received but relates to dominant cultures of epistemic and linguistic privilege. So while critical thinking, critical writing, critical reading and critical speech are related to each other - it is not necessarily the case that ability in one leads to ability or confidence in another, as the analogy of a continuum might suggest. Furthermore, students can hold more than one, potentially clashing definition at the same time and perform these discourses differently in different contexts. Therefore the analogy of the phenomena - a set of intra-acting knowledge practices, described by Barad (2007), seems a more appropriate one for understanding how critical thinking works as something that has multiple, clashing and shifting meanings that intra-relate to students' lives and experiences.

Understood as a Baradian phenomenon, critical thinking (and its affects) are a set of historically and socially situated discursive, embodied and material knowledge practices.

Such a conceptualisation is exemplified in the research data. For example, in one class the professional cohort were asked to sign a student code of conduct, committing themselves to certain values and behaviours, including being a critical thinker. By dedicating a specific classroom moment for students to read and physically sign the code with the group as witness, the *material* intra-action of pen, paper and silence took on a symbolic nature. It simultaneously created a *discursive* boundary that situated critical thinking within a set of specific disciplinary values. The act of signing and thus committing to becoming a (critical) student was also reliant on inscribed *social* relations; such as the authority the lecturer had to position critical thinking as a desired characteristic for their students and how students positioned critical thinking subsequently as the right and good thing to do to become academically and professionally successful.

This example reveals several things about student criticality. Firstly, in that moment critical thinking was material (the signing of a contract), social (produced within pedagogic and peer relations) and discursive (related to discourses of student success and professional competency). This also produced specific affects, including the desire for students to become *good* students and professionals, as constituted through a set of disciplinary specific values and behaviours, as well as producing a sense of intensity and gravitas induced by the act of silent contract signing. The simultaneous social-material-discursive nature of critical thinking produced in the classroom challenges its historicised position as a practice of 'reasoned' bodies engaged in cognitive battling and instead offers new philosophical imaginaries that recognise both the situated place of the human within practices of thinking and that the human might not be the only, or the most important, force at work.

Furthermore, because what constitutes critical thinking emerges *through* the material-social-discursive, it is always a contingent act of becoming as bodies move through different entanglements. A Baradian analysis positions critical thinking as not simply a cognitive act that is 'done' but a set of entangled material-discursive-social practices that emerge intra-actively *through* and *within* the space of higher education.

6.3 CONCLUSION – CRITICAL THINKING AS COMPLEX AND CONTINGENT

In mapping how students located themselves within critical thinking discourses, several factors become apparent. Firstly, it is difficult to boundary 'pure' definitions of criticality as in articulating definitions, students expressed their hopes and fears about what critical thinking could or should be, as well as what it is. Thus fixing critical thinking into

definitions tells only part of the story emerging from the data. More specifically, it fails to tell us how this act of becoming intersects with 'difference' or what the affective consequences of this might be. Secondly, whilst the research identified fifteen distinct definitions, boundaries between these were blurred. For example, the dominant discourses of critical thinking for assessment and citizenship outlined in [Chapter 3](#) were revealed in students' understandings, but in ways that were not mutually exclusive. Students may perform critical thinking in their assessments yet also be committed to critical thinking for social betterment or change. What this indicates is that students, and academic staff, work between multiple, conflicting and shifting definitions that constitute a complex set of knowledge practices. Such an analysis of students' descriptions of what it means to become a critical thinker moves beyond accounts that focus on the individual in a disembodied and de-contextual manner, towards interpretations that focus on the interconnections between critical thinkers and their context, as well as the role of their embodied identity in situating their engagement with *becoming* critical.

Understanding that critical thinking is complex and contingent may help academics and pedagogues understand why students often struggle to engage with it. For example, a student who performs poorly against the assessment criteria for critical thinking is not necessarily failing to think critically but may be failing to adapt to the (shifting) performance indicators required of them in higher education. These indicators of successful student are situated within normative notions of the ideal student as privileged, white, male and abled-bodied, as Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) describe. This notion of the embodied reproduction of becoming a critical thinker in higher education is one that notions of threshold concepts (Baxter-Magolda, 2006) and habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2002) do not fully help me to think through. Yet Barad's (2007) work on intra-acting phenomena - the way knowledge practices intersect with people, with place and with context, and how these can change over time and be contingent feels analytically richer. This acts a conceptual challenge to neoliberal discourses of education (and critical thinking) as a measurable technology by highlighting how knowledge practices in higher education are complex, contingent and embodied. Thus, following Fenwick and Edwards (2013), I argue that analyses of critical thinking should account for its precarity and complexity, rather than its certainty. Finally, as Becky's story illustrates there is an affective economy of critical thinking in which balancing multiple definitions can provoke anxieties, particularly about how to contain critical thinking within appropriate contexts and affective spaces. This will be explored in the following chapter.

7. 'WE DON'T HAVE ANYTHING CRITICAL TO SAY, WE REALLY LIKED IT'³ – RE-THINKING EMOTION AND CRITICAL THINKING

'I am passionate about everything in my life-first and foremost, passionate about ideas. And that's a dangerous person to be... not just because I'm a woman, but because it's such a fundamentally anti-intellectual, anti-critical thinking society'.

(hooks, 1994a, p.39)

hooks' quotation emphasises how being a critical thinker, and proudly embodying such a claim, is associated with the conflicting affects of both desire (to be passionate about ideas) and risk (of being critical in an un-critical world). Indeed, my data revealed that students did not simply *do* critical thinking; they *felt* it. Critical thinking was always encountered as an affective experience of some kind, even if it seemed benign. These feelings were not simply emotional reactions to isolated performances of critical thinking (such as feeling happy about receiving a good mark for a critical essay or feeling nervous about engaging in classroom debate) but instead students articulated a sense of *feeling their way* through complex affects when thinking about, doing and being critical.

This chapter discusses what students are saying about critical thinking's affects. [Section 7.1](#) explores student narratives describing what critical thinking feels like and discusses emergent patterns. I then focus on the ugly-feelings (Ngai, 2007) of critical thinking, specifically students' fears about embodying a killjoy persona (Ahmed, 2010a) in [Section 7.2](#). This is followed, in [Section 7.3](#), with an account of what it means to desire critical thinking as a happy object (Ahmed, 2010b). Finally, [Section 7.4](#) dislodges critical thinking from being purely a good or bad affective encounter and looks instead at how, in most cases, it involves mixed and contradictory feelings. I then analyse students' concerns about doing critical thinking right and in the right context, specifically their anxieties about critique 'spilling' from the textual to the social and personal.

Students struggled not simply with the academic language of critical thinking, but also the tensions of what it means to embody a 'critical' persona. Indeed, for the majority of students, being 'critical' felt worryingly close to its common-sense usage. A critical thinker was perceived as someone incredibly serious, who always found fault and who always saw the worst and students feared this could be time consuming, emotionally troubling and socially isolating. Yet when I asked if it was important to do it, the majority said yes. To be a critical thinker held the promise of transformation - into the right kind of student, the right kind of professional or a better kind of person. So while critical

³ Alicia, AO.

thinking did not always *feel* good, the positive consequences, particularly within an academic context, made it worthwhile and desirable. Students appeared to be entangled within these mixed, yet intense, feelings: on the one hand desiring the transformative power of criticality whilst also wishing to disassociate themselves from its negativity. The affective intensities of critical thinking were therefore not linear or straightforward, and were constructed in relation to broader affective investments such as the desire to be a successful student and with discourses of student performativity as demonstrated through academic assessment and professional competencies. Critical thinking involved negotiating and containing these affects in ways that many had not anticipated and, crucially, neither of the modules I observed had mentioned. Such multiplicity and complexity challenges dominant notions of critical thinking as a disembodied technology suited for a matrix measuring 'effectiveness', as well as challenging its place as an unproblematised essence or 'good' of higher education.

This chapter argues that thinking about what critical thinking *feels* like matters. Ahmed (2004) describes how emotions are deficiently positioned:

Beneath faculties of thought and reason. To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous. (p.3)

This emotion/reason divide acts to situate critical thinking as an act of rational, autonomous beings rather than, as [Chapter 6](#) argues, entangled processes of *becoming* critical which are complex, contingent and embodied and at stake in the production of conflicting affects. The emotion/reason divide also has the consequence that the affective remains an important yet disqualified discourse in the sociology of higher education (Morley & David, 2007). Indeed, Berlant (2004) in her discussion of how critical thinking tends to be 'smart, abstract and slightly over absorbed' (p.447) asks that we pay more attention to the role of the senses in thinking about critical thinking. Similarly Beard *et al.* (2007) argue for a 'richer conception of students as affective, embodied selves' (p.235). Furthermore, turning attention to affects, desire and emotion, as Hey and Leathwood (2009) discuss, allows a critical reimagining of the 'self-fashioning' (p.106) and rational neoliberal subject whose journey through education is conceived as emotionally neutral - a figuration which dominates thinking about students in higher education.

I use the word affective, rather than emotional, to demonstrate that emotions are not mere chemical reactions but are socially located and reproduced and intersect with one's material condition and embodied identity. For instance, the phrase 'boys don't cry'

symbolises that crying is not simply produced as stimulus/response but materialises itself through gendered social norms. Hey and Leathwood (2009) thus argue for a holding visible of the 'the educational politics of subjectivity' (Walkerdine, 1987, p.277) or how we come to feel what we feel. For example, McMillan (2014) describes the intersections between emotion and social class in how the transition to university was felt differently for middle and working-class students. Working-class students saw the decision to attend university as an 'active and hard won choice' (p.7), one tempered by conflicts between desire and class betrayal. Yet middle-class students were less fearful of such transition because they were equipped with information and resources to prepare them for what was to come (and perhaps not going would be a betrayal to classed expectations). This follows Reay (2000) who associates the possession of increased emotional capital (or the ability to cope/fit emotionally in a given context) with middle-class assets of confidence, security and entitlement. Therefore because emotions are not just a product of individualised and subjective experience but produced in the social, discursive and material realms, my analysis in this chapter of what critical thinking *feels like* should be read together with [Chapter 8](#) which directly addresses how these affects act to *differently* position higher education subjects.

As [Section 4.4](#) explores, while affect is produced through lived experience of bodies in the social as Ahmed (and others above) describe, it was also reproduced in the way critical bodies circulate, settle and are entangled with the world and its relations, as theorised by Barad (2007). Consequently, Clough and Halley's (2007) description of affect as meaning 'felt aliveness given in bodily capacities to act, engage and connect' (p.2) resonated through the data. Critical thinking's affects appeared to flow, be produced in relation to others, things and bodies and reveal themselves through specific moments or *affective intensities* in the data (Ringrose & Renold, 2014). As this chapter describes, such an analytical approach recognises that affects - such as feelings of worry or excitement - carried both social and embodied intensities. For example, such affects were revealed both in the words students used to describe their feelings about critical thinking in the interviews, as well as in the anxieties, silences and excitements fluttering through such discussions and observations.

7.1 CRITICAL THINKING'S AFFECTS

I firstly mapped responses to the interview question '*what does critical thinking feel like?*' and initially categorised these below:

Feelings about critical thinking	Number	Names	Indicative Example
Negative	2	Tobias, Leo	<i>'It feels like...you are constantly looking for faults in something and trying to undermine what's been said' (Tobias, I)</i>
Ambiguous	10	Rob, Bryony, Becky, Teresa, Kate, Jodie, Camille, Ellie, Bronwyn, Emma	<i>'It is quite a positive thing. I enjoy it. Even though the outcomes, especially with my interest in politics, makes me quite angry and frustrated' (Ellie, I)</i>
Positive	3	Monique, Carly, Joseph	<i>'You begin to question your own thoughts and why you think a certain way. And that can only be a good thing' (Monique, I)</i>

Table 3: Responses To Question 'What Does Critical Thinking Feel Like?

Table 3 shows that most students experienced *both* positive and negative feelings about what critical thinking felt like, with a minority ascribing themselves closer to either ends of the spectrum of affective states. Yet students also described the intensities of critique's difficult and ugly-feelings (Ngai, 2007) as well as its positive ideals. In fact, these feelings weren't 'in-between' at all and the majority tended to gravitate towards affective intensities of *both* negativity and positivity, of desire and anxiety. Thus the good/bad binary started to appear problematic because of its reductive capacity to singularly categorise people in terms of their specific contingent and contextualised utterances. While I began analysis with the intention of comparing positive/negative this revealed a simplification tendency in my categorical assemblage, whereby the data instead produced non-binariated overlaps and inconsistencies. Indeed, what is crucial (and what latter sections of this chapter discuss) is when these affects are at play within discourse – e.g. when and where and by whom does critical thinking get affectively positioned as negative/positive.

For example, I met Camille for our interview several weeks after a class where we were asked to think about how we developed our opinions on a series of topics such as abortion, crime and poverty. She referred to this task several times during our discussion as she *'felt really bad after it'*. What specifically troubled her about critical thinking was

the need to develop independent opinions from those of her parents, whose influence she felt strongly. Though she felt she would be '*more fulfilled*' if she can think critically she was also '*afraid of what people might think*'. These good/bad feelings were not isolated from each other but interrelated such that becoming critical involved considerable conflict experienced at the level of affect. Camille was born to a middle-class family of musicians and was studying outside her country of origin, although she later noted that such educational mobility was 'the norm' for her peers from international boarding schools. She describes how academic and political discussions were regular occurrences in her family home and that having strong, informed opinions was a prized attribute both at home and school. This created a distinct classed pressure shaping becoming critical, which generated intense and lingering feelings. Such affects produced a material and bodily response in her feelings of anxiety and were also shaped through social relations as mediated through her relationship with her parents and her discursive concerns for what she *should* feel.

Table 4 maps the positive and negative affective consequences associated with critical thinking that emerged from the data at as whole, with the factors highlighted in bold being described in *both* positive and negative ways.

Negative effects	Positive effects
Ugly feelings	Academic socialisation
Complicating everyday life	Accepting difference
Affecting personality	Critiquing everyday life
Revealing complexity	Developing originality
Affecting sociability	Morality
Additional time/effort	Personal development
Creating uncertainty	Positive sociability
	Professionalism
	Protection from ignorance

	Social change
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Table 4: List of Affects Associated with Critical Thinking

What becomes clear from this list, and from Camille's narrative, is how critical thinking's affects are interrelated. So while critical thinking can make getting on with others much easier because, for example, critical introspection asks students to challenge their prejudices about others to foster attitudes of being more open-minded and accepting, it can also negatively affect feelings of sociability, because those who question and consistently find fault can become positioned as negative and as killing joy (Ahmed, 2010a). Indeed, what it means to *feel* something is contextual – for example it can be fleeting or it can stay with us, as it did with Camille. Additionally something which appears to have been 'gotten over', can reappear and be conjured through moments of intra-action e.g. with people, memories, locations or pedagogic activities.

Methodologically, the difficulties of working to say definite things about affects as these are carried by words supports Barad's (2012a) claim of the need to enlarge discursive analysis. Indeed, the categorisations of positive and negative do not account for levels/intensities of such affects and their implications. I also believe some affects are more significant than others. For example the emergence of 'ugly-feelings' becomes particularly powerful because it challenges some of the traditional empowerment discourses present in critical pedagogies. For example Giroux (2012) describes how Occupy protesters have expanded 'the horizons of their own sense of agency' (para.6) through an 'incisive language of analysis and hope' and a 'politics of possibility' (para.12). Such positive and hopeful discourses are also mirrored in Freire (1996) who admits that while liberation can be painful it is only in becoming critical we can experience consciousness and freedom. These notions of critical thinking as positive empowerment arguably place insufficient attention on the difficulties, or as hooks (1994a) suggests the potential dangers, of becoming critical. The result is that critical and feminist educators face considerable challenges in making deconstructive critique simultaneously 'pleasurable' or more pleasurable than sticking with the known. These nuances in the data, which blur lines between positive/negative further confirm that, instead of operating along a binary, critical thinking's affects coincided and clash as a set of entangled, intra-acting practices (Barad, 2007).

7.2 UGLY FEELINGS AND THE FEMINIST KILLJOY

To hone in on the negative affects of critical thinking, I turn to two conceptual tools - Ngai's (2007) work on ugly-feelings and Ahmed's (2010b, 2010a) exploration of the feminist killjoy. In the former, Ngai investigates subtle expression of emotion - such as everyday irritation, envy and discomfort (rather than the more dramatic emotions of anger, pain, grief) and how these affective states can block or suspend action. In the latter, Ahmed (2010b) conceptualises what it feels like to occupy counter-hegemonic spaces and how this is associated with forms of affect that can be socially divisive and produce feelings of alienation in their subjects. Here, I will discuss how critical thinking appears to produce such everyday and ugly-feelings in students - of anxiety, awkwardness, and discomfort, before considering how these affective states are re(produced) through relations with others.

The 'critical' in 'critical thinking' does not fall far from its etymology of meaning an expression of disapproval and students often shared an assumption that criticality and criticism were the same thing. This consequently affected how they felt about doing and being critical e.g.

If I heard the word critical thinking I think bad feelings, bad words - like fiery and abrupt and things spring to my head because critical is associated with other words that have critical in, like critically ill, in a critical condition. (Jodie, I)

If you are critical of someone it's normally a bit negative... I think I'm a little bit pessimistic which maybe helps. (Leo, I)

Students strongly associated critical thinking with being disparaging of someone or something. Jodie describes this using the powerful adjectives of 'abrupt', 'fiery' & 'pessimistic' and in her reference to a bodily, reactive analogy of being seriously ill. Leo's critical thinking is also about such negative affective states and reactivates bad memories of authoritative others. His focus on negativity reflects something of his relationship with his Dad whom he later describes as being a critical figure, meaning someone who always found fault. For Leo, pessimism and critical thinking require each other. Similarly, Becky worries that it will mean '*expecting something bad in everything*' (I). Becoming a critical thinker appears to infiltrate students' sense of self, requiring them to adopt attitudes of faultfinding, mistrust and suspicion.

Bearing witness to the negativity produced by becoming critical stimulated considerable anxiety. For example, Jodie spoke of how we self-police the subjects of our criticality in order to protect ourselves:

Like child poverty in Africa, if you started thinking about that all the time it'd be awful. (I)

Ellie was similarly conscious that she was deliberately avoiding uncomfortable truths by warning:

Don't ask questions you don't want answers to. (I)

Furthermore, Teresa worried that the critical examination of her opinions demanded an interrogation of her background and beliefs. Whilst she saw that asking '*who am I, where do I stand*' (I) formed an essential part of growing up, it also raised difficult feelings about the uncertainty of burgeoning independence. For example, Ellie later talked about feeling guilty that she *should* be critical because that was what was expected of her, as a child of two journalists where talking critically about social issues at home was the norm. Similarly Teresa, as a 19-year old student studying away from her country of origin for the first time, articulated a deep sense of a burden of increased responsibility, whereby 'growing-up' and 'being critical' were talked about simultaneously. Critical thinking required students to confront the difficult knowledge it produced about themselves, their pasts and their future, which intra-acted with their differential subjectivities. Ahmed (2010b) talks of the need for analyses of affect to attend to bad feelings, not in order to overcome them but to learn 'how we are affected by what comes near' (p.216). Unpacking such feelings of negativity is not intended to point towards 'better' kinds of critical thinking that avoid it. Rather, these ugly-feelings tell us how students are affected by critical thinking and how such affects shape their engagement with critical thinking discourses. For example students like Ellie and Jodie potentially avoided the 'difficult' consequences of criticality for reasons of self-preservation, thus recognising an affective 'price' for their critical educational experiences.

Not only did it feel difficult to enact and cope with these ugly-feelings but it also had affective consequences of seemingly making life unnecessarily complicated. Becky worried that her criticality was spreading from the classroom to her living room, influencing the way she watched TV. She complained it was difficult now just to '*let it be*' or just to '*have something*' (I), without needing to be negative about it. Furthermore, when I asked Ellie what the characteristics of a critical thinking were, she described the difference between her and her sister, reflecting ideas about unhappy complication:

I think my sister is far...my sister is quite trusting. Yeah maybe, gosh, I don't trust anyone. My sister is very... She does obviously think critically about certain things. But she is far more open to, kind of, being told the information and this is what I've said and this is what I've seen so that's how it is. Whereas I'm more likely to be

saying 'well... have you looked at this avenue and have you looked at this'. She said to me 'oh you are just making life far more complicated. (I)

While being critical allowed Ellie to see more and to see things differently, the 'curse' of such knowledge required her to adopt a suspicious attitude to others and their ideas. This led to her construct herself as 'over-thinker' in relation to her sister. Ellie's account specifically echoes gendered notions of feminine submissiveness in her concern about not taking up too much space (or making too much noise). She feared becoming a 'a body that seems to get in the way' (Ahmed, 2014a, no-page), revealing something about how critical bodies are regulated through the circulation of affects in the social, whereby the negative killjoy persona, is inseparable from, for example, notions of 'legitimate' gendered critica voices.

This state of continual critical alert was also discussed by Tobias who describes what it feels like to think critically '*always criticising, always questioning – never*', and then takes a long pause, as if to demonstrate how exhausting all this can be. He saw this state as particularly problematic because of his desire to separate critical thinking as a purely academic activity – potentially as a consequence of his feelings, as a first-generation student, that this was not something 'his' friends and family engaged in. Similarly, Rob feared that over-thinking things could be emotionally draining and off-putting to others, suggesting an easy slippage between something being tiring and becoming seen as tiresome. Critical thinking becomes an interruption to a form of relaxed happiness - akin to a nagging voice prompting students to always think more deeply about the everyday. Being critical was thus posed in opposition to '*oh let's go with the flow, it'll be fine*' as Jodie stated in our interview in a relaxed, singsong, voice.

Critically examining everyday life was not only emotionally tiresome but also demanded additional time and effort. In the academic class, the lecturer Kathryn posed critical thinking in opposition to rushing in and acting, as something that required time and space to reflect. Similarly in the professional class, the lecturer Jo talked about how critical thinking required you to '*stand back*' and take time to think through things carefully. Reflecting this, seven students made reference in their interviews to temporality with critical thinking being both tiring and tiresome. For example:

When you have so much stuff to do and your mind is full of 'I need to do this, I need to do that' you have no time to think and then towards the end of your day, you are so...full of your day that you don't actually have time to think. (Teresa, I)

Teresa's quote likely reflects the pressures on students in their first few months at university to process vast amounts of new information. Similarly, Ellie says in our

interview that being critical works to her disadvantage because reading, assignments and decision-making now take so much longer than before. Students are required not just to *be* critical but to demonstrate *where* and *how* they have been so, in alignment with other key performance indicators demanded by their lecturers. Indeed, Teresa later said in the focus group that because she started her second-term assessments late, she did not have enough time to think critically in her essays and consequently received poor marks as a result. These difficulties in critical reading/writing could have been potentially exasperated by the fact that English was not her first language. Yet critical thinking was not difficult simply because it was additional, but because it required students to adopt potentially new and different ways of being and seeing the world.

In particular, students struggled to align feelings of critical negativity and unhappy complication with feelings of liking something. For example, Kate worried that she hadn't '*come across as critical enough*' (I) in her book-review as she mainly focused on positive features. In the academic class we were asked to critically discuss a book chapter and one group looked flummoxed saying:

We don't have anything critical to say, we really liked it - Alicia. Another student said 'it was hard to be critical. I thought it was awesome. I did literature at school and there were these big books, classics and what could you say about them? It feels the same. (AO)

Critical thinking as a process of faultfinding then felt awkward, particularly when they, as 'novices', were asked to challenge the view of 'experts'. This required a degree of self-confidence in their subject knowledge and critical ability that sat uncomfortably and resulted in the use of hedging phrases in class such as '*I'm probably being really opinionated but...*' (Alicia, AO).

This need to contain criticality because of its potential to offend, reflects its powerful associations with difficult and ugly-feelings. Indeed, there was some acknowledgement of the potentially defamatory nature of being critical by the academic lecturer Kathryn, who regularly emphasised that we should be '*critical of ideas, not the person having them*' (AO). While this is a neat pedagogical idea, novice critics (as exemplified above), clearly found this separation between person/ideas a really difficult thing to do. Indeed, liking something and critiquing it felt analogous, particularly when it involved another person – an academic expert, a tutor, a fellow student or a friend. This relationship was further heightened by relationships of power, such as between a tutor and student. Thinking about who has the right to be critical affirms Ahmed's (2012) concern over who constitute a legitimate speaker within the academy. Becoming critical is intimately

entangled with the numerous ways bodies are unequally positioned as powerful/powerless within the academy and the differential affects this reproduces.

A key concern was also how the adoption of critical behaviours could alter how students interacted with others. In the professional observation, the lecturer warned that critical thinking can be an irritating habit and *'you might end up very lonely'* - instead it might be best to *'do it in your head'* (Jo, PO). In the professional cohort, Kate, Bronwyn, Jodie (first-generation) Ellie and Leo (second-generation) all feared that they were critically 'working over' their families and relationships. They discussed a psychological theory of child development and how it allowed them to critically rethink their childhoods. This reimagining and often rejection of their past felt uncomfortable, reflecting Walkerdine's (2011) observations of how working-class students' adoption of 'academic' subjectivities led them to be ashamed of their homes and pasts. Her analysis renders visible the middle-class norms rarely made explicit in academic contexts, such as the notion of students experiencing academic 'belonging' unproblematically. Yet movement between social locations - such as attending university and as becoming critical - 'can be unsettling at best, terrifying at worst' (p.258) and could be experienced by students of all social classes as a 'loss of relations which make sense' (p.257).

Yet such affects could be arguably felt more intensely by those deemed 'Other' - such as mature female students. For example, Kate's experiences sat most powerfully with me when she worried that becoming critical (which for her was inseparable from becoming a student) could end her marriage. Possessed of new knowledge, confidence and critical abilities, she was no longer just a wife and mother, causing tensions within her relationship. This parallels Edwards' (1993) work on the identity shifts caused by higher education participation and the resulting affective consequences upon the personal relationships of mature women students. Indeed, becoming critical has the potential to have a deep impact on students' social relations. This is an important point in relation to higher education pedagogy symbolising how learning intra-acts with the experiences and subjectivities students bring with them into the classroom.

In the Academic group, Camille, Tobias, Bryony, Monique and Carly were particularly concerned that developing strong opinions could force you into conflict with others:

Because if you have your own ideas then obviously people have their own ideas as well, so you might lead to conflict with others...you don't want to show off too much because then you might like ruin your friendships or the relationships you have with others. (Camille, I)

Camille was also acutely aware of the negative sociality produced by having independent opinions and, again, echoed gendered notions of feminine submissiveness in her concern about not 'showing off' by having the wrong kind of critical voice. This reflects Ahmed's (2010b) analysis of the affective tensions of occupying a counter-hegemonic space, where she articulates how criticality as a gesture is reproduced through specific histories that position certain bodies such as the feminist and queer critical voice as being affectively troublesome. A figure becomes a killjoy because they do not desire the same happy objects as those around them, or they force others to unsettle aspects of their happiness that rest on the inequality of others. They therefore disrupt such shared happiness through the questions they ask or the non-normative bodies they inhabit. The awkward and lonely figure of the killjoy is one which many students feared inhabiting and so they restrained their critical voice accordingly, in order remain socially and emotionally connected. Thus students, in negotiating becoming critical, feel their way through the conflicting affects of getting on with others and being '*on it*' (Tobias, I).

Fears of embodying 'critical' in ways that seep into 'unhappy' affective territory were also reflected in students' concerns about how critical thinking required them to embody '*miserable and different*' (Becky, I). For example, in the academic observation, we were asked to think critically about different issues and our group were given the topic of capitalism. Bryony said to me:

I know its only been a couple of weeks but I am not sure I'm taking all this on. I don't think it has changed my everyday decision-making. I know it should. But I don't take it that seriously. (AO)

I asked her what she meant by not taking it 'seriously' and she described not wanting to dress like a 'hippy' in ethical clothing or not being able to admit eating a McDonalds. Bryony thus associated being critical with the identity work of adopting specific material embodiments and counter-culture values and behaviours. She feared becoming critical meant moving too far away from her comfort-zone, with such angst felt keenly in the world '*should*'. Thus being a critical thinker often meant being different or doing things differently, as Tobias describes:

I think that most of the time if you are being critical you are going to be opposing the general consensus of what people think. (FG)

Ahmed (2010b) states that 'if we take the shape of what is given' 'we experience the comfort of being given the right shape' (p.79). Being different felt uncomfortable because it acts to disrupt shared notions of how things should be, particularly when among family and friends. Yet at the same time, whilst critical thinking situated students as counter-

hegemonic, it also was highly prized and expected within higher education – through the seminar discussion or the critical assignment, as [Section 7.3](#) explores.

All the students gave examples of where they feared being critical could or had a negative impact on their sociality – from Camille worrying that having strong opinions different to her parents could cause family conflict, to Rob, fearing that he is overanalysing people and that this is stopping him from making friends at university. Monique was unusual. We talked about how uncomfortable she felt hearing her friends make racist ‘jokes’ and her refusal to laugh. She says:

I am seen as quite a serious person so that's why they may think 'oh she just doesn't get it'. (I)

She thinks that because she is marked as ‘serious’, her friends are perhaps less likely to make these jokes around her again, even if they will continue behind her back. Yet she does not care. She embraces killjoy. Perhaps her stance could be interpreted as constituting a highly performative version of student-hood, someone painfully keen to demonstrate her seriousness and her will to belong to the academy and to get critical thinking ‘right’. This desire is potentially related to intersected issues of race, class and gender as a black, first-generation woman, where she feels that she must work harder to be recognised as a critical voice.

It could also be that Monique is reclaiming, as Ahmed (2010b) suggests, a queer pessimism:

A pessimism about a certain kind of optimism, as a refusal to be optimistic about the right things in the right kind of way. (p.162)

Here Ahmed makes a striking point about convention, compliance and counter-hegemony. Monique could be seen to be enacting such queer pessimism in reclaiming seriousness as a form of critical strength. To be a killjoy does not mean desiring unhappiness or resisting sociality but it means not desiring to get along when getting along means aligning with an hegemonic constructs of happiness that conceal unequal power, as is the case for Monique refusing to ‘laugh off’ racism. While for most students the critical figure can be one who embodies negativity and ugly-feelings in ways that they see as personally and socially undesirable or, at least, in need of containment in appropriate spaces, places and bodies, the killjoy can be reclaimed, as Monique does, as a figure of strength or of political action.

I wish to conclude this section with two broad claims. The first is that critical thinking produces feelings that are ‘ugly’. These include guilt about wishing to resist thinking

about difficult feelings, of the awkwardness of voicing criticality in settings where to do so places you in opposition with others and of the insecurity about doing critical thinking right and in the right place. Ngai (2007) evocatively characterises ugly-feelings as:

A bestiary of affects, in other words, it is filled with rats and possums rather than lions, its categories of feelings generally being, well, weaker and nastier. (p.7)

These feelings were 'ugly' because they acted as everyday irritants. It was worry, rather than fear, guilt, rather than pain and awkwardness rather than anger that characterised these affective engagements. For example, becoming critical as faultfinding felt worrying and potentially socially awkward, bearing witness to negativity and difficult feelings felt uncomfortable and exploring the additional complication criticality brought felt emotionally and physically tiresome. As I will subsequently argue, these negative affective states co-existed (and were potentially mediated by) critique's positive ideals such that feelings elicited are not *entirely* bad. Though extreme feelings are present and possible as a result of critical thinking, what I see in the data from students are ugly-feelings; that is, everyday feelings that get under the skin (rather than perhaps tear at it).

The second claim is that such ugly-feelings construct the critical thinker as being counter-hegemonic in ways that feel socially undesirable. Students feared that being critical meant becoming different to others and worried this may have negative effects on their social relationships and their happiness. Ahmed's (2010a) exploration of the feminist killjoy relates these fears of being 'alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world' (p. 164) whereby students do not experience happiness from 'the right things in the right kind of way' (p.162). Although the counter-hegemonic figure is a lonely one, there appears to be space to reconstruct the killjoy as a figure of critical strength and imagine the possibilities for a feminist and ethical critical sensibility that recognises the legitimacy of such feelings of negativity. For example, Ahmed's (2014b) work is keen to reclaim anger as analytically and politically productive. Yet the complex positioning of the critical figure is underwritten by the fact that becoming *critical* is related to being *successful* in higher education – whereby the critical figure is expected, rather than excluded. Thus students' work to contain critical thinking in appropriate spaces, places and bodies shows how criticality involves *balancing* such affective intensities – between desiring (and being fearful of) becoming a critical thinker.

7.3 DESIRING CRITICAL THINKING

While critical thinking could feel bad it could also *do* good and consequently *felt* good. Ahmed (2010b) states that happiness is an orientation towards objects (which can be

feelings, people, atmospheres or places) and that such objects make us feel good because they are already prescribed as being good for us. Thus affect is contagious and shared and the good life is 'the life that is lived in the right way, by doing the right things again and again' (Ahmed, 2012, p.36). Conversely, we become alienated when we do not 'experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good' (p.41). Happiness is socially constructed and relational yet happy objects can be normative too (such as heterosexual relationships) and act to regulate and potentially isolate those that do and think differently. This section addresses whether critical thinking is a happy object and how it regulates happiness through notions of doing it right and for the right reasons. Indeed, despite its association with ugly-feelings and non-hegemonic sociability outlined previously, in certain contexts and spaces, being critical can be a very happy (even normative) thing. Yet while Ahmed's theorisations (2010b) help me analyse what it means to construct objects in relation to happiness discourses, she provides fewer tools for conceptualising critical thinking's positive energy. Instead I argue that a concept of *critical hope* examined by Bozalek *et al.* (2014) - which unites 'critique's disruptive power with hopefulness' intrinsic energy to transform' (Danvers, 2014, p.1239) might be a better way to think through the difficult feelings of critique whilst remaining positive about its possibilities. This section therefore outlines students' positive engagements with critical thinking, which included it being part of human consciousness, being linked to personal and social empowerment and improved moral-character.

Critical thinking was aligned with human consciousness, as way of *really* living. When I asked Camille if critical thinking was important she said yes:

Because we don't want to be robots [laughs], because it's what makes us human. (I)

Camille's statement reflects humanist philosophical notions that the consciousness of human beings differentiates them from machines or animals. While this notion appears to support ideas of critical thinking as a form of reason/rationality, that her criticality was simultaneously shaped by complex affects described earlier, challenges the view of critical thinking as *only* an emotionally neutral cognitive performance. It is also worth noting that before our interview Camille had attended a seminar on Marxist theory and later referred to Marx's statement that to be human is to be creative. This shows how a module on critical thinking is not the only discourse students receive on the matter and highlights the permeability of the research context. Notions of seeing more and seeing differently also fit with other empowerment discourses found in critical theories and pedagogies that aim to awaken consciousness through critical reflection. For example, work by bell hooks on critical praxis as a form of consciousness raising (1994b), Freirian

processes of *conscientização* (1996) as well as feminist empowerment education initiatives (Gore, 1992) are within this paradigm. Reference to being 'conscious' also appear elsewhere in the data with seven students referencing being 'aware' as an important characteristic of being a critical thinker.

Furthermore, eleven students also said in their interviews that a positive consequence of being critical would be the ability to see more, something also emphasised by both the academic and professional teaching staff. For example in the academic class, after an introduction to some critical thinking principles, students were asked to discuss images of urban buildings and discuss what they saw. One student said:

Before your introduction I wouldn't have known what to say about these buildings. Now there is loads I can see. (AO)

Becoming critical is often described using the analogy of having your eyes opened to see the world and its texts differently. Seeing more is also associated with no longer being naïve. Teresa, for example, positions being critical in opposition to those who live life blindly:

Just waking up every morning and going and doing what you think is right and just not thinking about it at all. (I)

Teresa positions her active critical engagement in opposition to those who do not think. Thus seeing the world differently often blurs into seeing the world in a more superior way to others.

Indeed, being critical becomes associated with increased academic intelligence and/or enhanced social and moral capitals that come from the experience of being at university. This reflects Burke's (2008) notion that critical thinking relates to other privileged academic discourses that can work to conceptually position insiders/outside, whereby criticality becomes a mark of distinction in academic contexts:

Lots of people might just stop there but that's not what being a critical reader is about, you need to go further than that. (Kathryn, AO).

This positions being critical as a collective aspiration towards doing things differently. When Kathryn praises students for being critical in class they smile – it feels good, aligning with Ahmed's idea that affect is contagious. Thus positive feelings circulate around critical thinking as a happy object and those who perform criticality 'legitimately' become positive examples through their praise as successful critical bodies in the university classroom.

Yet while notions of developing critical consciousness were presented as 'happy' objects in the data, such discourses are not entirely unproblematic. To question critical pedagogies and their empowerment discourses states can feel akin to treason. Yet as Morley (1998) argues, empowerment can act as a 'rhetorical device to disguise systems of domination' (p.16) for example, through how its practices enact a gendered division of emotional labour within higher education teaching. Thus being empowered raises questions about being empowered *by whom* and for *what purpose*. For example, while empowering self and others was a strong theme in the critical thinking of the professional cohort, many expressed serious concerns about the state of the profession they were entering (as well as the broader political context). It could potentially be a form of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) to desire criticality and resistance when reflection and resilience seemed to dominate the professional discourses. As [Chapter 9](#) discusses, where students are encouraged to turn their criticality inwards towards reflection as a coping mechanism, this has implications for more collective struggles for social and political change.

This not to deny that critical consciousness raising is worthy of doing but to state that desiring to see the world differently is a more nuanced practice than simply being seen or experienced as a universal good. For example, students' fears of critical thinking affecting social relationships deserve serious attention because of the very real personal consequences they fear it could bring (e.g. relationship breakdown). Families and relationships should not be positioned as simplistic 'barriers' to be overcome in becoming critical. Thus work on critical hope (Bozalek *et al.*, 2014) attempts to bridge the notion that while being critical can feel fatalistic and troubling, investing in hope for what criticality can achieve is invaluable in pursuing personal transformation and social justice. This concept also points to the importance of temporality, with present discomfort justified as a necessary part of future gain.

A key tenet of why critical thinking is invested with such hope is about having freedom to question rules and those in authority and develop independent opinions. Students saw this as an important positive effect of being critical:

We wouldn't then have our own opinions and our own judgements and our own freedom to agree, disagree, question and interpret. (Kate, I)

Kate links being critical with developing independent ideas and having the freedom to express them. Similarly, Tobias talks about how he finds the freedom to question in university environments that he did not have at school and that this feels liberating. When I asked what would stop someone from being critical, coming from a background

where ideas were imposed, as a consequence of narrow-mindedness or of fixed ideas as a consequence of religion, were seen as stifling. Five students specifically mentioned religion in their interviews and eleven referred more broadly to the strong influence of the ideas of others such as parents, teachers or academic thinkers. Critical thinkers were deemed to be 'free' because they were in contexts where they had freedom to think. This links back to Asad *et al.* (2009) and their exploration of how critical thinking has been positioned as a secular practice, resting on Western assumptions of the safety and morality of questioning others and the world around them. Therefore what it means to be positively affected by critical thinking, as a happy object, is highly contextual and influenced by the socio-political context in which it is performed.

Becoming critical was not just described as becoming more human or more aware but about being a *better* kind of person. Carly describes a critical thinker in idealised terms:

You can be a bit more willing to listen to other people's approaches. Instead of there being such extremes like 'I'm right, you're wrong and there is nothing else to say about it'. You become a bit more compassionate, a bit more humble, you know what I mean, a bit calmer about what people have got to say and you are willing to listen to everyone's point of view. (Carly, I)

A critical thinker is described as someone who cares, demonstrated by subsuming their thoughts, interests and behaviours in order to listen to those of others. Becoming 'better' is specifically linked to the ability to use your criticality in the *right* way. Critical thinking also becomes closely connected to the privileging of the university educated as possessing a heightened ethical subjectivity who consequently possesses a refined set of professional, moral and social responsibilities. For example, notions of selflessness and having concern for others allows the critical thinker to use their criticality to resist authority and strive for social change. Bronwyn talks about how critical thinking helps her to see beyond her limited worldview and her personal concerns. She says:

It's already made me think so much deeper; it's made me think further than just what I see. (FG)

The emphasis on 'I' relates closely to the idea of a professional being constructed through the professional discipline as one with superior intellectual and moral abilities equipped to act on behalf of others. Consequently, there could be good and bad ways to be critical and students talked about having a responsibility to use your critical thinking appropriately.

For example, in the focus group we discussed examples of critical thinking in the media. One example included controversial newspaper columnist and TV personality Katie

Hopkins' comments on those who find themselves in poverty taking responsibility for their fate. Bronwyn says:

I think there is power in a way in critically thinking and I think you know she is using her power on the TV and using the opportunities she's been given. But she's using it in a way where she's not really respecting that power of critical thinking in a positive way. Because there is nothing here that she is saying that is helpful to anybody. (FG)

Bronwyn invests the critical thinker with considerable responsibility to be critical for the right reasons. Becoming responsible is about being critically aligned in particular ways – in Bronwyn's case for using it to help, rather than judge, vulnerable people. What constitutes 'good' criticality is not *given* but socially constructed through, for example, codes of conduct expected from students undertaking the professional discipline. This supports Ahmed's (2010b) notion that objects become idealised because they are surrounded with normative values that construct a shared sense of belonging to something good.

Although being critical can have negative impacts on social relations, in the right context it can be beneficial. Bryony links being critical to enabling peace:

Well, like if you think about religious wars and stuff like that. I think they sometimes lack the ability to think critically or they think too critically of other people in the world and that results in things like terrorism. (I)

This quote reveals that students saw critical thinking as a way to better understand those with different opinions and to interrogate the assumptions their ideas rest upon. Whilst students spoke of the difficulties of managing the complexity that results from thinking critically, it also allowed students to become comfortable with diverse views. Joseph states that critical thinking:

Helps you be open-minded and accept people who are different and also to get on with people - not just to speak without thinking and offend people. (I)

Students feel that in critically questioning their assumptions they are less likely to be judgemental and more likely to be open-minded in accepting the opinions of others, traits they believed were socially and academically desirable. Critical thinking could be seen to enhance social relations by encouraging students to question their prejudices. For example, the assumptions behind those who they position as 'different' to them e.g. because of their social class, could be re-thought through critically reflecting on histories of political responses to inequality which symbolically create and affirm these different and unequal classed positions.

Critical thinking was also described as being enhanced by relationships with others. This is particularly the case where students have developed critical social networks where thinking critically together (and about the same things) feels good. For example, Becky and Ellie talk about how being critical is a feature of their friendship groups and Rob describes making friends through the feminist society who think critically in the same way as he does. While critical thinking can allow people to understand those who are different, intensely good feelings appear when students think critically about the same things. Jodie talks about how working on a group project and thinking critically together has been unexpectedly harmonious:

I thought that everybody would be arguing, people would have completely different things but we are quite a relaxed group so I mean everybody listens to everybody's point of view. And I think we're all on the same kind of track so there hasn't been complete disagreement in terms of what everybody is thinking. (I)

Criticality becomes a happy object because it is a shared orientation towards being on the same track and of the same desires to ask questions about the same things. It therefore, as Ahmed suggests, acts to regulate those who think critically about the right things in the right way, albeit along lines of academic and epistemic privilege.

Positive feelings about becoming critical are often difficult to separate from positive feelings about becoming a successful student or professional. For example, developing independent opinions while managing the multiple and conflicting ideas of others, is seen as an important academic and professional skill. As Monique says, academic critical thinking, especially in relation to essay writing, requires negotiating complexity:

It can't be as easy as yes or no. You have to take this factor into account but you can't ignore all of the others. So it makes you...things aren't as simple as they seem. And that helps you in order to look at different issues in a different way, which I found really useful across all of my modules. (FG)

While there are tensions in doing so, evidenced by the pause and sigh before stating that things are no longer simple, Monique, and other students, recognise that such open-mindedness is academically productive. Tobias also associated critical thinking with valued intellectual capital:

I think we have to critically analyse things to progress. If you don't then maybe you might not get above a certain mark or a certain grade... I think you need it. (I)

Critical writing meant getting good results and that felt good and therefore worthy of emotional investment. Similarly in the professional cohort, Bronwyn pointed to how being critical was essential for her career development:

As much as maybe more surface thinking, not going deeper, might seem nice and simple...if we approach that surface thinking with service users...then we are going to be missing a lot of things we need to deal with...I don't see how we can work without it. (FG)

Her words reflect a key tension of being critical - that even if it feels difficult, its positive outcomes make it worthwhile nonetheless. These are feelings characteristic of the everyday anxieties described by Ngai (2007). Although Bronwyn saw being uncritical as much easier, without it she knew she would not be professionally competent and perhaps even morally lax if, for example, she failed to notice crucial information that would assist her decision making. Thus a critical thinker was required to remain hopeful, to overlook the negative feelings of criticality by focusing on a 'higher' purpose - of academic and career success, personal development or social change.

Critical thinking often *felt* good because it *did* good; from empowering others to personal freedom. It is therefore difficult to separate the feelings of critical thinking from its consequences. I argue, using Ahmed (2010b), that what makes critical thinking happy is that it is positioned by others as a happy object. Consequently, people experience happiness in being close to something deemed happy or something that provides the possibility for happiness. For example, critical empowerment feels good because it is invested in positive ideals, particularly through the critical pedagogies enacted in both cohorts' classes. Seeing more and seeing differently becomes a mark of professional and academic distinction and consequently students feel pleasure in being recognised as such. Furthermore a critical thinker is characterised as possessing heightened moral subjectivity and so becoming critical becomes equated with superior moral capitals. Thus it feels good because that is what 'good' people do. As a happy object it therefore both relational and contagious. Yet it is also contingent - it feels good if performed in certain contexts such as the academic essay but it also felt troubling to voice criticality in the wrong ways for fear of offending others. There is potentially also a distinction between 'private' critical writing and more 'public' discussion whereby the latter involved further forms of visibility and performance that could be increasingly troubling for some. It also felt good to be critical together with those who thought the same as you but it also entailed the more difficult task of challenging those who disagree. Desiring critical thinking is therefore not a universal good that always feels good. Instead, it can be characterised as being about critical hope (Bozalek *et al.*, 2014) - recognising both its power to be troublesome and feel troubling, as well as its promise of positive transformation.

7.4 GETTING IT RIGHT IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Whilst the previous sections appeared to conceptually divide students' affective engagements with critical thinking into positive and negative categorisations, here I consider how these feelings *simultaneously* materialised. Managing these ugly-feelings and not being a killjoy, whilst at the same time desiring the positive consequences of being critical, required students to contain their critical thinking in appropriate spaces, contexts and bodies. It is these examples of getting it right and in the right place that characterise the ambiguous state of students' affective engagements with critical thinking. This policing of boundaries by students themselves and concern about the seepages from one 'territory' to another also indicate how being critical can involve movement into a different set of affective entanglements or relationships.

Space and place particularly influence student's engagements with critical thinking. For example, Bronwyn is conscious of whether the family home is an appropriate context in which to voice her criticality. She says:

It's not like I have to blurb it all out when they're not asking for an opinion...obviously you don't want to keep blabbing it off all the time when you are with your family (I).

Transferring critical thinking outside the classroom can feel like an inappropriate border to cross, as Bryony also describes:

What you talk about in the classroom, it is hard to relate to everyday life. Because when you are put in situations, you react in a completely different way to what is necessarily thought of as critical. (I)

While this narrative alludes to the demarcation of criticality to academic spaces and voices, it is also about students' awareness of the social and emotional consequences of embodying a certain killjoy criticality in the wrong context. Both Bronwyn and Bryony appear to contain and shape how they engage with the discourse as a consequence.

The gulf between speaking and voicing criticality is one created by similar concerns for containment. For example, Camille says:

You still need to share your thoughts but not too much because you don't want to be rude. (I)

Criticality required student to subject their emotions to regulation in order to be recognised and legitimated as a critical voice. For example, in describing the characteristics of a critical thinker the two most common references were to being measured and opinionated. This concept is further entailed in embodied social

characteristics, which situate some voices as being more legitimate than others. For example Carly's quote conjures classed discourses of being 'above' one's station and gendered notions of submissive femininity as not taking up too much verbal space.

The mixed affective engagements with such traits further reveal the ways students restrain their criticality. For example, Bronwyn talks about the negative consequences of being too opinionated by communicating your critical thoughts in an overbearing way:

I think some people can be just full of themselves, they just walk over everybody's thoughts and feelings and emotions and no actually that's not the right thing to do. You have to be gentle enough to consider people around you. (I)

For Bronwyn and others, speaking and writing your critical thinking is subject to a process of self-regulation in order not to isolate yourself from others. Furthermore, ideas about being 'measured' refer to being critical in the right time and place as Carly indicates:

Obviously if someone has got a view it is important to listen to them, you can't just shout them down all the time. But obviously you've got to pick and choose your timing. (I)

Communicating critically requires students to negotiate the positive outcomes of what criticality can achieve with a set of emotions, behaviours and practices that are socially acceptable and emotionally comfortable. Camille, for example, is conscious in our interview that expressing dominant opinions can place you in conflict with others by becoming 'a body that seems to get in the way' (Ahmed, 2014a, no-page) and so she talks of striking a balance and, for example, occasionally agreeing or admitting that something is true so as to move on and to not be in a continual argument. Therefore, students appear to construct notions of acceptable critical voices that balances being listened to with living the good or liveable life (Berlant, 2011, Butler, 2004), which are inseparable from how bodies, are regulated through unequal discourses of power in higher education.

7.5 CONCLUSION - RETHINKING CRITICAL THINKING'S AFFECTS

Critical thinking is not simply 'done' it can be an act of becoming that *does* something. The flow of affects produced by becoming and doing critical thinking are revealed through the considerable affective intensities emerging from the data. This aligns with Croussouard's (2012) analysis of how learning is always 'embodied, relational and affectively charged' (p.745). Critical thinking was an intensely affective experience that was not easily characterised as either good or bad. Students' discourses of containment

reveal mixed affective intensities and a need to *feel their way* through between being the right kind of critical in the right context. The data reveal the considerable anxieties students had about balancing and containing complex and often contradictory feelings. This highlights how pedagogical phenomena – such as critical thinking – are not simplistic processes of cognitive cause and emotional effect but entangled processes of *becoming* critical which are complex, contingent and produce conflicting affects. This conclusion aligns with the Baradian analysis of critical thinking discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

Secondly, because students were concerned about voicing their criticality right and in the right place and space, this suggests that there are complex social contexts that construct when critical thinking feels good. As Ahmed (2010b) discusses in her theorisation of affect happy objects are socially constructed and socially reproduced. Thus when critical thinking feels good it is often when we have been told it is good for us, such as via normative discourses of successful student-hood or when we associate it with positive moral characteristics, such as via affirming idealised professional values. Conversely, when critical thinking feels bad is when students appear to step over the affective tightrope into being *too* critical or *too* opinionated, becoming a killjoy who unhappily complicates with their negative habitus. While Barad helps me think through how critical bodies are produced intra-actively through the world in its becoming, Ahmed offers a powerful articulation of how the circularity of affect reproduces normative discourses of what it means to be and do critical and who is allowed to be so. Indeed, the affective consequences of being critical mean students engage with the discourse in embodied, and thus different, ways. Some, like Bronwyn, saw it as troubling but professionally necessary whilst Monique staunchly embodied killjoy to be academically successful. Therefore [Chapter 8](#) will further explore the gendered, class and raced notions of what it means to be legitimised as a critical voice in higher education and how and why students engaged critical thinking differently.

This chapter has also argued that paying attention to the emotional senses of critique, as Berlant (2004) suggests, is analytically productive. If a key feminist concern is to make the personal political, focus should be directed to what it means to think/feel and how these thoughts/feelings are produced through and by the world in its continual and dynamic unfolding. Recognising the embodied and the affective sense of critical thinking prompts searching for feminist and ethically sensitive forms of critique that recognise and make conceptual use of what critical thinking *feels like* as well as what it *is* and what it is *for*. Furthermore, bringing the emotions of critical thinking forth further chips away at the binary that persists between thoughts and feelings, highlighted by Ahmed's

quotation in the introduction. Becoming critical is therefore not simply a cognitive doing but a deeply affective practice – challenging notions of the neutrality of the critical being and consequently the possibility to technologise critical learning in higher education.

8. BEING CRITICAL, DOING CRITICAL

'Some more than others are given a place at the table, just as some more than others are at home in the body of an institution'.

(Ahmed, 2012, p.122)

The previous chapter described how criticality's affective intensities meant that students engaged with the discourse in embodied, and thus different, ways. This reflects Butler's (2009) contention that critique (which can be understood as the theoretical practice of critical thinking) is reliant on:

Embodied and affective practices, modes of subjectivity that are bound up with their objects and thus relational. (p.125)

Indeed, Thayer-Bacon (2000) describes how the image of the critical thinker has a history of meaning discursively fixed as 'a solitary figure with a furrowed brow, deep in thought' (p.17). This is no accident but reflects a specific paradigm of critical thinking and of the critical thinker that privileges masculine, individualised and rationalist knowledge practices in the academy, to the exclusion of critical voices deemed 'Other'. In parallel, Leathwood and Read (2009) discuss how traditional constructions of Western university students are rooted in gendered, classed, racialised and able-bodied notions of the individual subject. They argue that, despite the presence of more 'diverse' bodies in universities (and consequently the multiple possibilities for becoming a successful student), those positioned as 'Other' are likely to require more complex processes of adaption and self-regulation than, for example, white, middle-class men. Despite these notions of learning as contextual/relational and affective/embodied, higher education's pedagogical practices often take as their subject an unspecified body, failing to interrogate who these bodies are (and are not) in relation to categories of social difference. Consequently, this chapter argues that socially decontextualised and undifferentiated analyses of the critical thinker (e.g. Barnett, 1997) need to be brought to life through a feminist troubling of what it means to embody a critical thinker 'persona' and how such critical bodies get legitimised through powerful, normative discourses about both critical knowledge and higher education students.

[Section 8.1](#) firstly specifies my theorisation of identity, drawing on both Barad (2007) and Ahmed's (2010b, 2012) work. Following this, I explore the difficulties of capturing and working through the ways in which students embody 'different' identities, particularly focusing on how difference comes to matter in specific ways through the agential cuts researchers make (Barad, 2007). [Section 8.2](#) then uses three analytical

optics of maturity, gender and subject discipline to examine how ‘difference’ plays out through student enactments of critical thinking and how performing criticality ‘right’ intra-acts with normative models of successful student-hood. Finally, [Section 8.3](#) reflects on the data ‘hot-spots’ (MacLure, 2013b) of assumed attributes of *confidence* and *elegance* emerging from students’ descriptions of the characteristics of a critical thinker and how these get re-produced through embodied intersections of gender, class, race and ethnicity. Whereas earlier chapters have given briefer attention to the importance of difference - for example in student’s narratives - it is this chapter that makes it visible in the DNA of my analytic frame. This was, to some extent, a sequencing decision shaped through writing and editing processes but was also influenced by the desire to do justice to ‘difference’ through more detailed analytical discussion – rather than use difference ‘labels’ lightly.

This chapter is theoretically informed by Ahmed’s (2012) work on racism and diversity and how the micro-politics of power in higher education operate to make visible and exclude specific discourses and bodies, most often to the detriment of those already marginalised. Indeed, the ‘marked’ category is *per se* always a deficit one as it is constructed in opposition to a perceived normative body. This idea informs my claim that becoming a critical thinker is entangled within the multiple ways bodies are marked and unequally positioned in the academy and, as such, is a process that is potentially more problematic for marginalised voices and bodies. Moreover, how these ideas about critical thinkers get reproduced over time is informed by Barad’s (2007) work on the apparatus. This concept speaks to how particular disciplinary or routinised practices construct a viewpoint on which to see (and judge) specific ways of doing and embodying critical. For Barad (2007) apparatus are not simply observing instruments but:

Boundary-drawing practices, specific material (re)configurings of the world, which comes to matter. (p.140)

How critical thinking becomes gathered and boundaried through practices is reflected in the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering: they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering (Barad, 2007, p.148). In everyday language, this suggests that what it means to be a critical thinker is not straightforward or transparent but instead reflects specific way(s) of seeing, and defining the boundaries of, critical thinking. Such a claim means that getting critical thinking ‘right’ should therefore be understood as less of an exercise in students meeting critical learning objectives and more about interrogating the social-material-discursive conditions of possibly for *becoming* successful critical beings.

8.1 HOW IDENTITY/DIFFERENCE COMES TO MATTER

Analysing students' experiences of critical thinking through notions of 'difference' requires firstly making explicit how I theorise identity. Identities are not simply pre-existing essentialised categories, psychological states or individual narratives but simultaneously produced through the entanglement of the material body *with* others through social relations and *through* the symbolic power of the discursive. This approach applies Ahmed's (2010b, 2012) thinking about the power of social relations to discursively shape and construct bodies as hegemonic/non-hegemonic and legitimate/illegitimate. It also employs Barad's (2007) theorisations of subjectivity in both the role of the material in shaping identity and experience as well as how the social-material-discursive intra-act simultaneously to re-produce individual identities. Identities should therefore not be conceptualised as 'natural' - in the sense of emerging only through individual bodies' and their biological characteristics - but may be socially, culturally or institutionally assigned e.g. citizenship, gender or belonging to a subject discipline.

Such identity narratives have a performative dimension in how they become internalised and/or reshaped by individuals. Weedon (2004) describes:

As individuals are inserted within specific discourses, they repeatedly perform modes of subjectivity and identities until these are experienced as if they were second nature. Where they are successfully internalised, they become part of lived subjectivity. Where this does not occur, they may become the basis for dis-identification or counter-identifications, which involve a rejection of hegemonic identity norms. (p.7)

Consequently, identities are not stable or unified and can shift and change, be contested and multiple. For example, within higher education teaching and research, white, male, able, and middle-class bodies are symbolically positioned as 'elite' and materially rewarded. Using Ahmed (2010b, 2012), this is because certain affective states (e.g. the idea of someone as authoritative) 'stick' more easily to particular social objects/bodies (e.g. elite, white, males) because of their historic relations of dominance. This concurrently gets reproduced through access to differently privileged discourses and material rewards within particular institutions. In addition, using Barad (2007), embodied privilege is also recognisable and imposes itself through material space (e.g. buildings named after famous male alumni or donors, creating feelings of unbelonging for 'Others'). Furthermore, what it means to be a body marked 'Other' is a product of the entanglement of social-material-discursive phenomena, which produces particular optics in which certain bodies/identities are deemed legitimate/illegitimate. Thus identities are

not simply pre-existing biological or essentialised categories but *come into being* through relations of the social-material-discursive with the body. As such, identity is not a singular entity but is complex and contingent. This raises several methodological issues about how to package and present analyses of ‘difference’.

8.1.1 THEORISING DIFFERENCE

As I engaged with data analysis, important questions arose about how people become categorised as different, why certain categories of difference emerge as analytically important (over others) and how categorisations produce patterns of inclusion/exclusion. Processes of identity categorisation can be seen to enact a series of ‘agential cuts’ (Barad, 2007, p.178) in the data. This is firstly because certain differences come to matter more than others through what becomes visible in the data and through my own experiences within the social-material-discursive arrangement of which I am a part. ‘Agential cuts’ also recognises that categorisation reduces people into selective and reductive social groupings which boundary bodies into different realms of possibility. Furthermore, while these categories denote something in common (e.g. being above 21) they can obfuscate different respective positions within this category (e.g. different ages and life experiences).

Despite this, categorisation is arguably invaluable both in bringing order to data and in denoting something ‘shared’ about particular identities and experiences. For example, the use of ‘first-generation’ was an attempt to measure students’ social class and their opportunities for social mobility in relation to their parents. First-generation is a commonly used institutional identity marker of social class within higher education research, particularly in the USA, and often denominates access funding via scholarship schemes or inclusion within widening-participation initiatives (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Yet Carly (second-generation), who went to an inner-city comprehensive and whose mother studied for a degree as an adult before returning to being a part-time care worker, differed from Bryony (first-generation) who went to grammar school, had a pony and whose parents owned a successful business. While markers of social class can be multivalent and culturally specific (for example Carly having a pony in a Traveller community would mean something different again), the category of first-generation on its own failed to tell me anything definite about the social class of my (albeit a small group of) participants in terms of having a clear sense of differentiated access to privileged economic, cultural and social capitals.

However, what is useful about the category of first-generation is that it relates specifically to students' social and cultural preparedness for university based on their parents' educational histories and social capital as opposed to economic measures of class like parental income or postcodes. It can also offer some information about students' background and their attitudes to, and sense of belonging within, educational contexts. Indeed, Thomas and Quinn (2007) make a compelling case for the entangled relationship between social class and first-generation entry in a global context despite recognising that the term is 'contested, paradoxical and ambivalent' (p.62). Although no measure of social class is perfect, in hindsight the research may have benefited from complementing this categorisation with additional measures e.g. parental-occupation or student self-report.

Boxing people into identity categories is also flawed because categories are subject to the limits of what it is possible to see and know. Butler (1999) critiques how identity characteristics are often theorised in list-like fashion, as if they are all equal, knowable and separate. She calls this 'the embarrassed etc.' (*ibid*, p.143). Importantly, Butler recognises that such nonchalant identity theorisation is a consequence of the *limitless* ways identities can be conceptualised. Indeed, processes of categorisation can lead to fetishising 'difference' through the ways 'agential cuts' produce patterns of inclusion/exclusion and norms/Others. Thus part of me felt secretly relieved when I had three black students, two students from outside the UK, two students with a disability (here, I am almost tempted to finished the sentence with an etcetera, symbolising such commodification of difference). This feeling of 'relief' came from a misplaced sense that I had 'done' difference because those deemed 'Other' appeared more significantly 'different' precisely because gradients of difference get defined in relation to the norm (as non-disabled, for example). Yet such processes of categorisation overlook the fact that difference is never 'done' and neither it is ever possible to fully reveal itself as an analytical process, as Butler (1999) highlights. For example, while I asked a question about disability, this could obscure the fact that the effect of having a disability within higher education is enormously varied, differently reported/disclosed and can be transient across time, contexts and cultures (Wydell & Butterworth, 1999). Thus challenging the neatness of identity categorisation and representativeness requires a continual (albeit imperfect) reflection on who is included/excluded.

The following note from the academic cohort observation reveals how singular and fixed identities are always illusions precisely because there is always something outside of (and in addition to) a discursive label:

After initially taking note of the numbers of male and female students, one student (Rob) who I'd listed as female introduced himself as a 'he' and used a male name. I spoke about it to Kathryn in the break and she explained she felt awkward because his email still used his female name. Later in the class I approached him to see if he would take part in the interview and said that I had a lot of women already and it would be good to get a different perspective. I wanted to reinforce something of his 'maleness' but felt very awkward! (AO)

In the recruitment survey, Rob selected 'male' as his gender identity and made no mention of his gender in the interview. I also did not ask. It would be inappropriate therefore for Rob's experiences to simplistically represent male, trans or queer criticality. This is not just because my participant group was small and claims to representativeness are not integral to the research design but also because it could lead to essentialist and reductive assumptions that I can unproblematically 'know' identity and its impacts. Debates about the inclusion of queer and trans people in feminist spaces revolve around similar complex questions about what it means to claim belonging to, or reject, gender categories and the unreflexive deployment of blunt gender categorisations - the latter exemplified in my initial concern to label students as male/female. Indeed, transgender narratives (as with all gendered experiences) are:

Formed through divergent gendered experiences and constructed in relation to temporal factors of generation, transitional time span, and medical, social and cultural understandings and practices. (Hines, 2006, p.49)

Hines argues that while gender binaries are now commonly problematised, transgender/queer experiences are often homogenously theorised with a 'lack of emphasis on particularity' (p.49). This argument reflects how gender (and other) identity categories are contested, ever shifting and tricky to 'capture' and claim knowledge of, and the consequent need to avoid reifying and essentialising Rob's (and others') identity 'labels'.

8.1.2 SPEAKING ABOUT DIFFERENCE

The aforementioned messiness of working through difference is inspired by the nuances within the data. I naively expected to find 'difference' I could neatly package and present e.g. that first-generation students might verbalise having lower confidence about being critical because of their lack of familiarity with higher education's social and cultural norms, compared to their middle-class peers. Yet how students were different and the impacts of this on their engagements with critical thinking appeared much more subtly.

In the research, the majority of students proclaimed that *'everybody thinks critically on a certain level'* (Monique, FG). Yet such narratives of 'equality' were often quickly followed by concerns about differential access:

I think everyone can find it quite easy. But it's like anything; you have to practice at it. So if you've always been encouraged to do critical thinking, maybe through school you'll obviously find it a lot easier. But for me because I'd never really...I might have done it, but not in an official way if that makes sense. (Emma, I)

Emma's first impression of critical thinking is relatively straightforward; it can be accessed relatively easily and equally. But later, her narrative hints at the role of education in creating ideal conditions for developing criticality and how being deemed 'official' as a critical thinker comes from the distinction of being at university. Her description of the clash between notions of critical thinking as equally accessible to all and *also* as something contingent on specific circumstances or identities is typical of the contradictory way students engaged with the notion of 'difference' in the data.

Students also found questions about 'difference' difficult to answer. Note the following exchange with Tobias:

E: Do you think certain kinds of people find it easier than others?

T: Certain kinds of people?

E: So this could be their values or their identity characteristics – their gender, class or race, for example.

T: Ah okay. Maybe someone who studies a lot will be a better critical thinker than someone who doesn't. Erm...can you repeat the question again please?

E: Do certain kind of people find critical thinking easier than others in terms of their identity or experiences, for example?

T: [Long pause]

The awkwardness of the exchange potentially reflects the fact that my question was loaded in the phrase 'certain kinds of people'. It also highlights how talking about bodies as unequally positioned is problematic. This could be because critical thinking is framed pedagogically as a way to challenge power e.g. *'Don't just understand and reproduce but evaluate and challenge'* (Kathryn, AO). Therefore conceptualising unequal access to the tools to question inequality might feel obscure or uncomfortable. Furthermore, it is potentially difficult for students to be conscious of and articulate the ways in which they might be unequally positioned through their differently historicised and socially situated identities. For example Sayer (2005) describes how subjects of contemporary liberal democracies experience a sense of 'denial' about class, finding it embarrassing to

acknowledge because of the very conditions in which such marks become activated. That is, via access to privileged educational opportunity structures students are encouraged (in some disciplines) to reflect on their privilege in ways that may be different/contradictory to how their classed identities are understood outside the academy.

Because of such problematics around knowing/speaking identity, using case studies of different critical voices' experiences in the focus group allowed further space to talk through 'difference' abstracted from students' own experiences. Indeed, the direct nature of my interview question asks students to draw on personal positions very sharply compared to the focus group's generalities. These different optics, used together, allowed me to challenge assumptions that the post-equality, post-feminist (McRobbie, 2011) generation were somehow difference blind, leading to as Ahmed (2013) discusses, the impression that we are 'over certain kinds of critique' whereby 'feminist and anti-racist critique are heard as old-fashioned and out-dated' (no-page). Yet as Monique articulates:

I always find myself in certain situations where it may seem that I am being held back because of my race and gender. (FG)

Her use of the word 'may' reveals further complexities over whether she claims she *is* held back or whether she is *misrecognised by others as being* held back. Thus in speaking about difference these multiple, often contradictory, discourses are rendered visible. While it is often difficult to directly know/speak difference, notions of differential access to critical thinking's discourses do emerge in the data – particularly in relation to the more abstract critical thinking examples of others used in the focus group, as well as through the silences and contradictions in students' accounts.

Being aware of the dangers of simplistic categorisations when set against the fluidity of identity, as well as the difficulties of conceptualising and speaking about difference allows me to explore the nuances in the ways students engage with critical thinking. For example, it is not the case that a mature female always engages with critical thinking in different and conflicting ways to a younger male. Students shift and resist critical subjectivities as they negotiate and reproduce the entangled material-discursive knowledge practices that constitutes critical thinking. Yet certain discourses regularly surface - such as the insecurity many mature women expressed about their academic worth in relation to those they saw as more legitimate knowers or how different subject disciplines placed differential value on specific critical behaviours. Exploring these accounts further may tell us something about what embodying or 'doing critical' presumes or requires.

8.2 DOING CRITICAL THINKING DIFFERENTLY

8.2.1 CRITICAL THINKING AND SUBJECT DISCIPLINE

Critical thinking is not a generic set of practices but represents a multiplicity of discourses that are re-produced through different embodiments and locations. The 're' recognises that such discourses are not static but circulate via social-material-discursive practices that settle differently on different bodies and contexts, meaning that becoming critical in the academic subject is *different* to becoming critical in the professional subject. Using Barad's (2007) notion of apparatus, I argue that the two subject disciplines work within different 'apparatus' or ways of seeing/doing/being critical that were often implicit and revealed through notions of what *values* someone studying that subject should embody and enact through their critical behaviours.

In the academic social science subject, critical thinking was described as a form of abstract ideology critique. This need for abstraction allows students to understand the intellectual grammars of their discipline to then apply it to another context, which potentially becomes more crucial in 'non-applied' disciplines. Being critical was about more abstract and broad structural analysis e.g. by reading society and its texts for evidence of power and inequality, which filtered down to processes of individualised faultfinding via practices of critical reading e.g.

The ability to analyse, evaluate, criticise arguments, not always taking things at face value so looking for underlying themes. So see what's being said or seeing what's being implied from what's not being said. (Tobias, I)

'Academic' critical thinking rested on the assumption that all texts contain inherent biases that students need to find and reveal through deconstruction. The notion of texts being produced through specific ideologies also emerged as a common theme:

Why do people say certain things? If someone was politically left wing or right wing, they are going to say different things. Say they had the same sheet of information; they are going to bring something else to the forefront, picking and choosing the information that is relevant to the points they are going to make. I'm glad I'm doing it as a module; I think it'll come in handy. (Carly, I)

Here, becoming critical is about adopting both values and practices. Students must recognise and become comfortable with the notion that such underlying ideologies exist in all texts in order to enact a critical investigation of *where* they exist and *how* they relate to the argument at hand. Carly also notes how useful the module will be to her study of the subject confirming again the close relationship between becoming critical and becoming a successful 'academic' student.

On the other hand, the professional social science cohort tended to see critical thinking as a professional competency enacted via practices of critical self-reflection. As Bronwyn states:

When you think critically you are thinking about the bigger picture... And that reflection is stopping and thinking rather than just your initial reaction to something... you can often bring things from it which will help you in the future and I think critical thinking does exactly the same. Thinking about something in a critical way, you can move forward. (I)

'Professional' student criticality involved a project of moral self-regulation; working through competing discourses and feelings to make critically informed decisions. It was akin to a form of psychological cleansing in order to produce a set of interferences that can be used to make informed professional judgements. Students in the interviews also describe critical thinking interchangeably with reflection (as Bronwyn does above) - as a willingness to open yourself and the world around you to scrutiny. While features of critical thinking such as the importance of asking deeper questions are prevalent in both disciplines, the purpose towards which critical thinking is put to work is different. This finding parallels Mitchell *et al.* (2004) who found that applications of critical knowledge practices differed amongst Modern Language (a more traditionally abstract academic subject) and Social Work (a discipline reliant on applied knowledge) students. For example, the latter were highly skilled in linking formal knowledge to professional practice but struggled making more abstract theoretical links in their critical assignments, whereas the former were more confident engaging in abstraction theorisations but rarely exemplified this critical thinking in applied or 'real-life' scenarios.

Becher and Trowler (2001) see academic communities as akin to tribes with their own values, apparatus, codes and discourses. These order and produce disciplinary epistemologies (such as critical thinking) and students are inducted into these processes via academic socialisation. While the transfer of disciplinary discourses onto students is not a straightforward transaction, there is a definite sense in which students enter:

A pre-existing discursive world in which they are positioned in various ways (as student, learner, competitor, debtor, consumer etc.) and in which more powerful others (lecturers, more experienced students etc.) have greater facility, knowledge and understanding of higher education's discursive practices. (Mann, 2001, p.10)

In the academic course these discourses include a critical approach to interrogating and explaining the social world and its texts, an interdisciplinary ethos thinking across the boundaries between academic disciplines and a desire to effect social change and

address forces of power and inequality. In the professional course these discourses include a desire to help the vulnerable and marginalised, emulating a model practitioner who is both reflective and informed and a context that balances a broad range of interdisciplinary theoretical and practical knowledge.⁴ These disciplinary discourses construct criticality's purpose and direction within these disciplines as detailed above – for the latter it is often, but not always, a matter of the professional critically reflecting on her place in the world and their ability to enact change in others and in the former it is about academic students critically interrogating ideologies and events to find meaning in the social world.

As well as the more *explicit* disciplinary codes outlined above, critical thinking intra-acts with other *implicit* values. The following note sums up a discussion I had with the academic lecturer, Kathryn about whether you could be a sexist and a critical thinker:

She said no, but students do try. She talked about the fact that the department has a certain culture and that those views just wouldn't be tolerated, however convincing the argument. She said it may be different in other departments and institutions. This is just the culture students are signing up for, 'even if they don't know'. (AO)

In the context of the academic discipline, criticality is not separate from disciplinary, departmental or individual academics' personal/political assumptions. Thus some aspects of the academic 'contract' are hidden, despite neoliberal desires for transparency. In this case, the departmental culture Kathryn describes is one of left, liberal values and the importance of socio-political inclusion.

Whilst similar values were also present in the professional cohort there was also a heavy emphasis on the specific traits (such as tolerance, empathy and respect) required for professional competency. This potentially links to the need for professionals to develop individualised and specific critical responses, as opposed to more generalised or abstract ones. Indeed, when I ask Joseph whether, if at all, he thinks critical thinking is important he says:

I'm going to be handling other people's lives; I cannot afford to be namby-pamby when it comes to thinking. (I)

Joseph links being serious and professionally responsible to adopting the academic and professional values and practices associated with critical thinking. Indeed, professional students are required to sign a code of conduct, discussed in [Chapter 6](#), which includes

⁴ Descriptions adapted from the course summaries in the undergraduate prospectus.

the requirement to be a critically reflective practitioner. Critical thinking therefore becomes a discourse to speak through and construct disciplinary values, as well as to reproduce them.

However the transfer of disciplinary cultures onto members is not straightforward. Just as it is unlikely for all members of an institution to internalise its mission and values, it is not the case that students will live and breathe their module guides and their associated learning outcomes either. For example, while the predominant focus of 'academic' criticality was not on personal self-reflection, academic student Monique also narrates how the module has led her to re-think her own personal educational history:

Before thinking critically and studying X, I would have thought that that's just how things were but never really thought about the reasons why. (I)

As detailed in [Section 8.1](#) neat categorisations of difference are rare because individual identities are so complex and contingent. Thus many academic students were self-reflective like Monique, just as many professional students were conscious of political/theoretical bias. However, disciplines did construct particular and different 'apparatus' about what critical thinking *is* and how it should be embodied through the articulation of a set of disciplinary values. This does not mean that there is nothing general or transferrable about critical thinking. For example, these differential disciplinary understandings overlap as they share a history in the developments of their disciplines and, consequently, their understandings of critical thinking might be similar. Yet what is more crucial to emphasise here is that becoming critical is not simply an abstract *doing* by a decontextualised student 'body' but an embodied practice such that what it means to be critical differs in relation to disciplinary location.

8.2.2 OLDER, WISER? AGE AND BECOMING A CRITICAL THINKER

While disciplinary difference is rarely visibly embodied, age is more commonly associated as an identity characteristic. Five of the fifteen interview participants were over twenty-one at the start of their course. These all came from the professional cohort where the majority of students were mature (64%) compared to the academic course where they were in the minority (13%).⁵ Yet mature students are a highly diverse group 'who may have highly complex and fragmented pasts' (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012, p.1). For example, Bronwyn left school to work in a factory '*because that's where my Dad told me to work*' (I) and after having children, retrained as a florist before returning to education

⁵ Student data gathered from institutional student records for the 2012-13 cohort

in her forties. Ellie was in her late-twenties and had worked as a tour guide in Portugal before returning to university education. While processes of identity categorisation can homogenise difference, these 'mature' students clearly differed from each other in terms of their embodied characteristics and life and educational experiences, as did the younger students. Indeed, while the data analysis initially relied on the HEFCE under/over 21 to denote 'mature', students described maturity more broadly in terms of both age and wisdom. These conceptualisations of age/wisdom were drawn from age-based norms - such as parenthood or independence from parents - further reflecting the normative assumptions and nuances behind identity labels.

While students of all ages defined their critical thinking as being in development and consequently all worried about getting it 'right' students' feelings about their academic confidence were often constructed through notions of age and prior educational experience. For example, the mature students attributed their concerns about critical thinking to their anxieties that they were not at the same standard as their colleagues with more traditional routes through education. When Bronwyn talked about writing critically she said:

I have absolutely no idea where I am, how far behind I am, I've got nothing to guide me. Whereas some people have done A-levels and they know, they've been marked they've done essays. I've never had anything like that before. (I)

Bronwyn, along with Ellie and Jodie, all took Access courses (higher education preparation courses for students entering through non-traditional routes e.g. A-Level) but felt they did not directly prepare them for practices of critical thinking at university. Yet apart from Camille (who, along with Teresa, was educated outside the UK) all the younger students gave examples of thinking critically in their A-levels or equivalent. From the eight younger students educated in the UK, five were also offered AS and A-levels in critical thinking to enhance their academic preparedness (although Tobias was the only one who took it). In describing what makes someone a critical thinker Emma says:

[They] did do critical thinking at A-Level so I guess they must be critical thinkers. (I)

Emma positions critical thinking firmly within the skills discourse, as an academic accreditation and proof of possessing a discrete critical knowledge. Yet she later reflects that those who passed the A-Level weren't necessarily any more critical than others, revealing further complexity around what it means to be certified as 'critical'. However, in most cases younger students' confidence came from a sense of being 'schooled' into the next stage of education, and the academic practices it required, whereas older

students worried that returning to education put them at an intellectual disadvantage compared to their younger colleagues.

Becoming confidently critical rested on more than possessing academic-skills. Students articulated that the confidence to write and speak critically required a strong sense of self. While many mature students felt uneasy about their academic preparedness, they drew confidence from other life experiences:

I'm quite sort of comfortable with my own identity and I think having that comfort enables that confidence, because I've got my base so therefore it gives me the confidence to express my ideas and opinions. Whereas if you are younger maybe, you haven't had those experiences, you aren't feeling so confident in your identity then that would affect whether you would be an active critical thinker. (Kate, I)

Kate equates being self-assured as a pre-requisite to being critical and sees this developing with age and experience. Mature students Ellie and Jodie both describe not questioning problematic situations in the past, which, with the benefit of age and experience, they would now approach differently. Similarly, younger students such as Camille, Tobias, Emma and Carly described being 'mature' as an ideal characteristic of a critical thinker. Carly adds:

I am still a child. I've not seen it all, done it all. With different experiences comes different views to things... I mean, this is the first time I've been away from home and I only live 2 hours away. (I)

Speaking critically appears to require a self-assuredness that develops with age and experience. It also requires having life experiences to think critically about and on which to base your opinions, which younger students like Carly feel they lack. These notions constructing the authority to speak are also classed and gendered. For example, Carly feels her lack of social and cultural capitals position her critical voice in deficit as she later mentions not having been 'travelling' - an experience often symbolic of a middle-class 'rite of passage' to broaden the mind. Furthermore, a 19-year old woman describing herself as a 'child' potentially reflects Ahmed's (2014a) description of how critical authority does not discursively 'stick' to women. Therefore when becoming critical, successful mature students tend to draw confidence from their life experiences and more developed sense of self, whereas younger students take confidence in their academic preparedness – discourses simultaneously entangled with classed and gendered norms.

Students' excitements and fears about developing independent opinions were similarly age-related. Older students worried about how becoming critical impacted on their relationships with their families and friends whereas younger students worried about developing independent/original ideas and how these might fit in within new or existing

critical social networks. For example, mature students Ellie, Bronwyn and Kate all talked about how developing critical capacity influenced their personal identity and consequently their domestic relationships:

My sister has noticed that my vocabulary has already changed; she said you already sound like a professional, coming out with more theories and ideas and questioning things...I don't want to come across as the sister who is at university who is telling her what to do. [Laughs]. Know it all Kate again! (Kate, I)

[Chapter 7](#) discussed how the affective intensities of being critical meant students' contained their criticality in 'appropriate' locations/moments. Older students like Kate tended to worry about whether their critical voices acted as inappropriate challenges to existing individual and social norms, particularly where they were not used to speaking out, or being seen as someone who speaks out. However, younger students worried more about their capabilities when developing independent opinions and the impact this might have on their future relationships. For example, Camille had considerable anxiety about the need to develop independent critical opinions:

I think I'm bringing up too much the ideas that I've been listening to... like politics for example, I have no ideas whatsoever that are mine – they are all my Dad's. That's why I'm not...into politics because I don't want to bring in my ideas, because they are not mine...because I can't argue them, because I just took them for granted. But I really don't think I am [critical] yet, I'm getting there... it's only the beginning really. (Camille, I)

Camille, and other younger students, associated becoming critical with maturing personally, socially and intellectually. For Camille recognising the history of her ideas then revealed the considerable affective force of having them interrupted. Both younger and mature students worried that developing independent opinions could place them into conflict with others. Younger students associated criticality with developing a more certain sense of who they are and what they think and older students worried how such new opinions might fit with how they are currently perceived by others.

Yet Camille's example above shows it is difficult to separate age from other facets of identity, particularly social class. Whereas Camille's anxieties about her confidence in critical thinking related to her need to develop independent opinions apart from those of her educated parents who had strong left political beliefs; first-generation students such as Tobias worried that his critical voice needed to be contained within academic spaces, separate from home.

If I'm at home in a relaxed environment, I wouldn't be as, on my game, kind of, I'd probably be more passive about it. (I)

So while Camille was sure of the need to develop a critical voice in her familial network, Tobias was less certain of where it was appropriate to use it. These classed differences appeared in mature students as well. First-generation mature students such as Jodie gave examples of where she felt confident using her critical thinking to help explain things about education to her teaching assistant Mum who she describes as '*not a critical thinker*'. Whereas Ellie, who came from a family of journalists, talks of growing up in a critical household:

Every day we had every single newspaper in my house and they'd go through and would say 'that's not right' and 'that's not right'. It was just an environment that I grew up in. (I)

In Ellie and Camille's context - criticality was the norm in their domestic histories and they negotiated how to fit within existing critical networks. Whereas for Jodie and Tobias who did not grow up around such critical 'role-models', their critical selves required further creation/translation. It is crucial to state here that their social background does not equate to a *lack* of criticality but that certain behaviours characteristically developed in more middle-class households (such as intellectual debate around the dinner table and articulating independent opinions) more closely related to the performance of criticality required by higher education. Therefore, those with access to classed experiences of critical behaviours - such as engaging with argument at the dinner table with highly educated parents - may find it easier to adapt to becoming or feeling 'at home' (Ahmed, 2012, p.122) as critical voices in the academy.

8.2.3 CRITICAL BEINGS AS GENDERED BEINGS

Both cohorts were numerically female dominated with 71% of the academic cohort and 75% of the professional cohort identifying as female. Of the four males I interviewed, one was trans (discussed above) and their stories cannot (and are not intended to) represent the 'male' or 'female' student experience. However, critical thinking was gendered through its pedagogy and its reliance on gendered assumptions about the characteristics of a critical thinker.

GENDERED PEDAGOGY

Critical thinking's pedagogies appeared highly gendered by their close association with 'feminised' emotion-work, as well as in the emphasis on embodying criticality as 'masculinised' rationality. In the academic course, the module was taught in small groups using a participatory teaching style with regular activities and group discussions. This was notably different from more traditional 'sage on the stage' lectures employed in

other modules. Kathryn notes how *'it's a real performance for me'* (AO) both to employ such interactive pedagogies, as well as to take on the pseudo-pastoral role of being responsible for first-year students' academic and personal skills development. Indeed, the teaching of critical thinking becomes symbolically positioned with female gendered subjectivities and values, where notions of 'soft' skills revealed a gendered dichotomy between the 'fluffy stuff' of learning development and the delivery of tangible 'hard' knowledge. Thus the historic association between reason/feelings is inscribed as a gender code at the level of institutions and materialised in terms of the historic public and private division of emotional labour. Kathryn is contradictorily positioned within these discourses. She is invested in this emotional labour because of it being an excellent productive pedagogy for those most outside the notion of traditional student but is also troubled by its restrictions.

After one class, where a male student was being disruptive, Kathryn and I talk about it:

She mentions a very popular and charismatic male tutor, who some female students report not liking because they say things like 'he doesn't give me any space to speak'. She reflects that he [the disruptive student] might say 'oh finally, here's a proper academic, not that woman on about critical reading again'. (AO)

Kathryn had spent many years in insecure contracts after having children, despite having a strong publication record. This contrasted with her male colleague described who had a permanent job and taught the theoretical (as opposed to the skills based) modules. This is not simply about the gendering of primary care responsibilities but about continual gender bias within academia where female capital is misrecognised (Morley, 2013) and where *'that woman on about critical thinking'* becomes negatively positioned as not being a *'proper academic'*. For example, note Carly's description of them both:

He's really fun. You know when you think of an academic, you would never think of them to be laid back and fun.

Kathryn hands out worksheets and I'm like ah that's sweet because no one else does that for us. And she comes out with little hand-outs and I'm like that's cute. (I)

That the male tutor is lauded for being laid-back and the female tutor infantilised as cute reveals the existence of unequal structures of gendered knowledge and the contingency surrounding the production of legitimate intelligent, critical voices. Indeed, my reading of 'caring' as feminised also reflects a specific optic of inequality that is further testament to how critical pedagogies and their emotional labour get reproduced in the academy. The circulation of such unequal discourses, as Ahmed (2012) suggests, reproduces dominant notions of power and authority in the academy, shaping who becomes positioned as a legitimate critical speaker and thinker along normative lines. Or, using

Barad (2007) critical voices materialise themselves to certain bodies as a consequence of socially and discursively produced optics.

CRITICAL ROLE MODELS

Yet discourses of masculinist rationality have not disappeared altogether but are revealed through how students think about what it means to *embody* criticality. When I asked students how they became critical thinkers, the majority named the influence of an educated male figure. Of the ten who mentioned a person – seven said their Dad; one named a male theorist and one a male friend. Only one student, Bryony, named her Mum. Some of this reflects global patterns of access to education, whereby these students' Mums are perhaps less likely than their Dads to have university level qualifications. Indeed, while in 2013/14 women comprised 56% of UK higher education students (HESA, 2014), in 1970 this stood at 33% and in 1980 only 36% (Office for National Statistics, 2010). However, that 90% of students questioned associated critical thinkers with the masculine body cannot simply be accounted for by a historic lack of women in the academy but is associated with gendered discourses about knowledge and authority, revealed in the descriptions students used of their critical role models. As Kate said of her Dad:

He's a huge reflector, he'll always sit quietly, take everything in, churn it over, think about it and then he'll come back to you, several days later when you've completely forgotten about the conversation and he'll suddenly want to talk to you about it and he's been thinking about it. And he'll come out with more points and ask you what your feelings are on it. I think he's naturally a critical thinker – if there is such a thing - I think if anyone is, it's my Dad. (I)

This reflective, wise soul has something of the 'old male sage' about him. He is the lone philosopher, seemingly unencumbered by other, domestic responsibilities, the one who simply sits and thinks. He also appears to engage deeply with knowledge but shows emotional detachment in doing so through demonstrating considerable patience, echoing ideas of male 'rationality'. Emma's dad is similarly described as objective and restrained:

He kind of asks a lot of 'why' questions. Say if I was upset when I was younger he'd be like 'okay so why are you upset?' and I'd explain it to him. And then he'd be like 'well why did that make you feel like that' and I'd say and he'd go 'how can we move forward, how can we go around?' He'd kind of look at the overall thing and really think about it to try and see different ideas. Or if my brother and I were arguing, he'd really try to work out why. (I)

When describing people we are often drawn to stereotypes to help us make sense of and tell stories of the world. This is especially the case when we know someone's complexity so well that to pinpoint who they are and present it as 'real' is impossible. Thus Emma's

Dad is probably not always so patient and Kate's Dad not always so wise. However, what is powerful is that they are drawn to these stories of patient, wise men as idealised representatives of criticality.

There was a sense in which some bodies materialised more easily as 'critical' in students' minds than others, because of their historic position of dominance over structures of knowledge. For example, the notion of the masculine and rationality were interlinked, reflecting the historicised positioning of male reason versus female emotion. This is discussed by Thayer-Bacon (1998, 2000) who describes how the close relationship between rationality and masculinity has deeply affected our understanding of what a critical thinker looks like. In such a context, emotion (and potentially the feminine), collective thinking and uncertainty are devalued in comparison to rationality (and the masculine), individual reason and an assumed clarity of argumentation.

GENDER, COMMUNICATION AND CRITICALITY

While critical knowledge discourses are historically and culturally associated with masculinity in students' articulations, the performance of critical thinking is described using characteristically 'feminine' traits:

I think maybe girls have a better ability to critically think than boys. Boys are generally quite logical aren't they? Whereas girls tend to, sort of, think outside the box a bit more and think around why something is the way it is. (I)

Bryony draws on familiar gendered stereotypes of women as 'reflective' and men as 'logical' to describe how different people might become critical in unequal ways. When I ask for an example she says:

I don't think boys can read social situations as well as girls can, especially from a younger age. I think critical thinking and social situations are quite closely linked to each other. Like the social situations you find yourself in can be completely swayed if you have the ability to critically think, whether it be about the person or the situation. (I)

Critical thinking becomes akin to staged performance, where the right voice, behaviour and body intra-act to create a stronger illusion of being legitimate. For example, the academic lecturer regularly states the need to 'choose your words' (AO) when speaking and writing critically. For Bryony, a key performance indicator of critical thinking is effective communication, defined as the ability to carefully manage people, as well as to negotiate your own critical voice and behaviours. Yet communicating criticality links to gendered (and reductive) notions of women as emotional caretakers – as communicators, rather than thinkers (discussed by Morley, 1998).

One explanation could be the supposed feminisation of higher education, where the ability to communicate (which is also normatively classed and raced) is prized (Leathwood and Read, 2009). Here, female students are seen as better at adapting to these 'rules of the game'. Thus where critical thinking is positioned as a 'soft' communication skill, arguably women are fit for the starring role. Yet it could be that students are performing criticality as a surface discourse because they fail to grasp its intelligibility and process its social context and affective consequences, as Clegg (2000) argues students do with reflection. Thus performance analogies sit comfortably where fixed ideas of doing critical are absent. Perhaps notions of performance also sit easier for those, such as women, whose intellectual capital has been historically misrecognised. By talking the critical talk they almost fake it till they make it. Yet talking the talk – although it can be recognised as valuable in certain assessments, quickly becomes delegitimised as 'feminine' soft skills, preserving some elusive 'genuine' critical thinking for those who do not need to *become* critical, but already have the prerequisites to do so because they embody traditional intellectual male bodies. This parallels Hey and Leathwood (2009) who argue that:

Policy injunctions deemed to produce the 'right' kind of higher education subject requires a great deal of dispositional adjustment for young women in particular. (p.111)

Becoming critical is therefore not separate from the multiple ways gendered bodies are unequally positioned as powerful/powerless within the academy, whereby the pedagogies and practices of critical thinking are often feminised as 'soft' and consequently marginalised. Furthermore, describing criticality as effective communication conceptually positions the feminised performance of criticality as 'smoke and mirrors' in relation to some elusive traditional intellectual body. While it is not simply the pale, male and stale dominating all critical discourses, students still drew heavily on masculine images of critical role models. Critical beings are therefore not decontextualised vessels but rendered as *gendered* beings.

8.3 WALKING THE WALK, TALKING THE TALK

Dehghani *et al.* (2011) found a direct correlation between student's reported levels of self-efficacy and their abilities in thinking critically. They argue that the role of developing students' confidence and self-belief is crucial for developing students' critical abilities. Yet while themes of confidence and elegance as characteristics of a critical thinker emerged as data hot-spots, the ability to demonstrate confidently critical is

dependent on the intersection of numerous embodied characteristics and behaviours that are gendered, classed and raced.

CONFIDENCE

In the focus group we discussed feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez and the backlash she received (included rape and death threats) after campaigning for Jane Austen to be on a UK bank note (Philipson, 2013). I asked whether her experience made students think differently about being critical. Bronwyn said:

Well, I'd want to know my facts because it concerns me when I sit in things like seminars, I think I'm not confident with my answer, I don't want to say...I'm very aware of that I think. So I think I'd want to be sure that I really had looked into it and I was confident in what I was saying. Because otherwise it is going to show and it feels rubbish when you don't feel confident. So I think in the story, because I wasn't familiar with it...I can honestly tell you that I'd been completely unaware of who is on the bank notes. So I'm really uninformed of this, so it is kind of a bit hard to put an opinion when I actually don't have the knowledge behind it...It does force you to really know your stuff doesn't it? (FG)

Bronwyn worries about not being informed enough to voice her opinion and how the feared consequences of looking stupid in the classroom (or experiencing abuse like Criado-Perez) forced her to be really 'know her stuff' or else stay silent. Thus becoming confidently critical is not just about adopting an unproblematic 'can do' attitude but is constructed in relation to students' previous experiences and their classed, racialised and gendered bodies, as well as in relation to what it is they are critiquing – in this case the hegemony of male power.

Bronwyn (a mature, white, female, able-bodied and first-generation student) expressed concerns about not feeling good enough as a critical voice – both because of her perceived lack of academic 'kudos' due to her returning to education later in life, but also because of her relationship with her domineering father who was disparaging of her abilities and reluctant to encourage her, as a working-class female, to pursue work or educational opportunities. She felt that her critical voice needed to be carefully constructed in order that she is both heard and seen as legitimate. This raises questions over whether all bodies feel the same need to monitor whether their critical voice is 'good enough' and supports Ahmed's (2012) assertion that some bodies (specifically white, male, middle-class, able-bodied subjects) are more 'at home' (p.122) in higher education.

ELEGANCE

I think you are more likely to offend...if you go in like a bull in a china shop and say 'I think this' and 'I think that'. So instead of just throwing your opinions out without any sort of education, you are learning how to say things, when to say them and where to get the information from to support you...and the whole sort of, your body language, the way that you talk, what you wear. Because everyone judges everyone, you can't help it. Whether you discriminate against them or not, you do judge people. So if I walked in here wearing a headscarf you'd think a different thing than if I was wearing a mini-skirt and a crop top. It's just different. To know in different situations how to dress, how to speak, how to maintain eye contact. (Carly, I)

Carly's *becoming* critical thinker requires speaking and behaving in highly performative ways. Carly seems conscious of shaping herself as a critical thinker by restraining her emotions and replacing them with patiently constructed 'elegant' language. This language is physical as well as verbal and involves conscious self-construction of her critical voice and body in order to ensure she is recognised as a legitimate and serious critical thinker. The fear is that being offensive or misrecognised is the consequence of not knowing how to speak or be critical in the 'right' way. This also relates back to Barad's (2007) notion of apparatus and how dominant images of what a critical thinker is and is not, articulated by Carly, reflect a specific way of seeing the world in which the critical thinker gets continually reimagined along normative lines.

It is problematic to tease out exactly where some of these expectations about what it means to embody critical come from. Some echo the words of the classroom, specifically Kathryn's emphasis on the need to '*choose your words*' (A0). Others reveal classed, raced and gendered discourses of criticality that circulate and settle in Carly's impression of what being critical might look and sound like. For example, Carly hints at the educational privilege involved in becoming critical as she strongly associates learning this new way of being and speaking with becoming a successful student in higher education. Such discourses also echo western masculinist, 'rational' subjects – the kind of critical thinking role models discussed in [Section 8.2.3](#) and by Thayer-Bacon (1998, 2000). Furthermore, she is conscious of how she communicates her criticality through her body and clothing. The specific mention of the headscarf draws on multiple complex racialised associations with feminine submissiveness and the mini-skirt reference posits the opposition between overt female sexuality and criticality or intelligence. Therefore what makes someone critical is not a neutral ideal but comes with the assumption that some bodies and voices are 'naturally' more critical than others. This, in turn, means that those 'Others' may have to work harder to construct themselves as legitimate critical voices.

8.4 CONCLUSION – BEING AND DOING CRITICAL

Being critical and doing critical is not the act of generic 'critical beings' but critical bodies located in the particularities of their social characteristics and differences and the multiple intersecting impacts of these upon their own experiences. This is not to claim that male or female or young or mature or academic or professional students engaged in critical thinking in distinct and binaried ways but that discourses of criticality are re-produced through the diverse ways bodies are positioned in the academy.

Whilst analyses of difference are informed by multiple agential cuts and are always imperfect, nuances in how discourses around criticality settled or were marked on the body revealed that becoming critical was neither neutral nor equal. Firstly, both the professional and academic disciplines had different values and practices associated with critical thinking's purpose and direction. This created sets of disciplinary values around critical thinking and, through a circularity of affect, constructed what performances of criticality were deemed valuable. For example sexist values were deemed counter-hegemonic in the academic discipline and consequently students were concerned that their criticality reflected a specific set of political, as well as academic, values and indicators. Secondly, identity difference was marked on the critical body through the intersection of age and social class to produce the sense that some critical bodies were more legitimately 'mature' or prepared for criticality than others. Thirdly, while pedagogies and practices of critical thinking are often feminised and marginalised, students still rely on masculine images of critical role models. This demonstrates, as Ahmed (2012) discusses, the ways critical bodies are subject to the multiple ways gender re-produces inequalities of power in institutions and how the circulation of such specific apparatus or optics (Barad, 2007) reproduces our imaginaries of what a critical thinker is *like*.

It is not simply that because people are different or they study different things that they engage with criticality in different ways. It is also that discourses surrounding critical thinking settle more easily around certain bodies. The multiple constructions and characteristics of the critical student – such as being elegant or confident – revealed that normative ideals of the ideal student subject discussed by Leathwood and Read (2009) were still present. This demonstrates that those positioned as 'Others' in higher education have more work to do to become recognised as legitimate, critical bodies and voices than those traditionally 'at home' (Ahmed, 2012, p.122) within higher education.

9. DEAD, DUMBED DOWN OR DISCONTENTED? CRITICAL THINKING, HIGHER EDUCATION AND NEOLIBERALISM

'With school turning out more runners, jumpers, racers, tinkers, grabbers, snatchers, fliers, and swimmers instead of examiners, critics, knowers, and imaginative creators, the word 'intellectual,' of course, became the swear word it deserved to be'.

(Bradbury, 2008, p.68)

The context of higher education within which student critical thinking is developed, performed and assessed reveals something about the ways critical knowledge practices are shaped and given value by broader socio-political influences. Historically, higher education was intended to produce more democratic citizens, capable of critically debating and creating solutions to the problems facing society (Barnett, 1997). Yet Davies (2003) argues that the prominence of neoliberal discourses, with their emphasis on individual self-surveillance, management and control, acts to stifle critical debate in the academy. Such neoliberal policies are, according to Lynch (2006), at odds with the fact that universities continue to market themselves on claims to foster freedom of expression and critical thought. Evans (2004) agrees that higher education has shifted from a world where creativity and criticality were prized, to a world where universities are expected to fulfil the roles of the marketplace and act as training grounds for employment. She argues further that the dominance of bureaucratic practices stimulates anti-intellectual and anti-democratic cultures, leading to the *death* of critical thinking in the academy.

Certainly, the social and pedagogical conditions for critical thinking described by critical and feminist pedagogues (e.g. hooks, 1994b, Freire & Ramos, 1996, hooks, 2009, Canaan, 2013) including the importance of supportive student-teacher relationships, freedom to explore topics in depth and regular, intimate critical discussion, now appear at odds with common practices in higher education such as large, impersonal lectures, modularisation of knowledge into distinct blocks directed towards assessment and the positioning of students as knowledge consumers. Canaan (2013) argues that enacting critical pedagogies in such a context represents an act of resistance and offers 'revitalising hope' (p.43) to the neoliberalising English university by transforming the student teacher-relationship to one of equality and by reimagining pedagogy as a political practice. However she notes how the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in the academy has led those committed to critical pedagogies to feel 'depleted, stressed and depressed' (p.44) at the seemingly insurmountable challenges this presents. Such a state of affairs is discussed in Bradbury's (2008 – but originally written in 1953) quotation above whereby he predicts how future education systems will no longer focus on producing creative and critical

thinkers but on self-serving, individualistic subjects. This quotation also indicates how the ideal of the critical intellectual is a long-established desire (or perhaps even a fantasy?) As well as having implications for thinking about critical thinking, the broader socio-political consequences of this educational shift are raised by Hey and Leathwood (2009) who state:

If subjects are becoming go-getting life-long movers and shakers, what happens to the social, the collective and interdependent relations necessary to sustain a 'liveable life'? (p.107)

Exploring the state of critical thinking in higher education therefore links to other important questions about higher education's philosophical and pedagogical role in shaping individual and social relations.

Despite this pessimistic picture, the academy is both equally alive with engaged, critical students as it is with neoliberal practices. Indeed, the past four years have seen a number of high-profile student activist movements, most notably in response to increased student fees (e.g. White, 2010) and privatisation of university campuses (e.g. Ratcliffe, 2013). For example, my own institution in 2012 and 2013 saw students occupy buildings in protest at the outsourcing of accommodation, catering and security services to private companies - implying resistance to the conceptualisation of the university as a business, rather than an educational community (Danvers & Gagnon, 2014). These student activists specifically drew connections between increased marketisation of the academy and its negative impact on student critical thinking whereby:

This new ideation of the university is continually forcing us as students to think of ourselves as selfish consumers, rather than encouraging us to critically engage with the status quo for the benefit of others. (Segalov, 2013, para.9)

Segalov's concern is that consumer discourses only provide terminology to explain critical knowledge in terms of an individual free-agent accumulating education purely for its resale value, obscuring other educational philosophies such as the critical engagement with the status quo to inform debates about collective social justice. Indeed, a key tenet of the *Sussex Against Privatisation* campaign, with which Segalov was involved, was about students working *together* to act on behalf of 235 staff whose jobs were at risk (Sussex Against Privatisation, 2012). While [Chapter 6](#) discusses how critical thinking refers to a complex entanglement of practices that includes, but is not limited to, political protest - student activism is arguably one of the most potent and visible expressions of critical thought in the academy. The continual presence of student activism make it difficult to argue that criticality on campus is dead.

However, is this a sign of the flourishing of critical thinking in universities or is it indicative of limiting opportunities in the everyday practices of teaching and learning in the academy to be critical and the concurrent need to turn to activism as a critical outlet outside the classroom? Where institutions can be both alive with student activism but equally dominated by neoliberal managerial practices, what does this reveal about the state of critical thinking in higher education's everyday pedagogical encounters? Is critical thinking dead, with creativity and critique being replaced by process and product? Has critical thinking simply shifted in form and focus, co-opted by the academy as a pedagogical tool and subsequently been tamed or even dumbed-down? Or is critical thinking instead discontented, alive in the neoliberal academy but misrecognised or squeezed of conceptual space, as Segalov (2013) suggests.

To answer these questions, [Section 9.1](#) introduces how critical thinking was presented to students in the two modules I observed, noting how educational measurement such as learning outcomes and assessment criteria permeated classroom vocabulary. I describe how students responded to the dominance of marketised assessment discourses, particularly noting the influence of student performativity in the need to 'get it right'. I also raise some of the potential clashes when neoliberal discourses of value and measurement, sit alongside critical pedagogies and their politics of democratisation. [Section 9.2](#) hones in on student performativity in assessment to consider whether critical thinking has changed from a political gesture to a performative and technologised one. [Section 9.3](#) then explores the 'domesticating' effect of critical thinking's association with individualised processes of moral and intellectual self-improvement. Finally, [Section 9.4](#) discusses how *critical hope* (Bozalek *et al.*, 2014) can be productive in understanding how academics and students can remain affectively invested in critical thinking in (and about) the neoliberal academy.

9.1 CRITICAL THINKING'S PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICES

In order to analyse the *state* of critical thinking in higher education, I drew on the observation data gathered in my study to explore what students were taught about critical thinking and how they responded. To recap, students in both the academic and the professional courses were observed in the first term (October-December) of their first academic year in a core module. The professional module was about academic skills more broadly, with just one lecture and seminar specifically about critical thinking, whereas the academic module was dedicated to critical thinking alone. The main assessment for the academic module was a 1,500 word critical review of a set text but a

small percentage (not stated) given to workshops and tutorial attendance and participation. The assessment for the professional module was a critical summary of a research article (50%) extracts from the reflective journal (40%) and a portfolio which included records of e-learning participation (10%). Further details about the modules' format and pedagogy can be found in sections [5.5](#) and [5.8](#).

Four key things became apparent when *thinking with* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) the observation data. Firstly, critical thinking was described as a form of tangible intellectual capital with esteemed 'value', reflecting economic notions of higher education's products as being tangible and measurable, and as something to 'get right'. Secondly, the dominance of economic discourses of 'value' framed not just what critical thinking *is* but its purpose and direction, with critical thinking being positioned as something that could be 'traded' for academic and professional reward via success in assessed work. Thirdly, the vocabularies of assessment in the classroom were broadened out to regulating social and emotional behaviours, symptomatic of the dominance of neoliberal performative cultures in the academy. Fourthly, while lecturers did enact what could be described as critical pedagogies, the way these intra-acted with concurrent neoliberal assessment discourses meant issues of unequal power became more apparent and yet rarely problematised.

In both modules, critical thinking was positioned by the lecturers as a superior skill or disposition developed through the experience of being at university. This notion was also highlighted in the discussion about the close link between critical thinking and academic socialisation in [Chapter 6](#) and in relation to the positive affects of critical thinking in [Chapter 7](#). As the academic lecturer Kathryn stated, critical thinking was something '*we do*' not '*them*' and is about seeing more, seeing differently (and potentially seeing 'better' than others) exemplified in her claim '*that's where some people may stop*' (Kathryn, lecturer, AO). Similarly in the professional course, critical thinking is presented as an '*expert level skill*' that is '*particularly required and expected in academic work*' and is essential for professional success by '*helping you to solve problems so that you can help others*' (Judy, lecturer, PO). Here, critical thinking becomes associated with increased academic intelligence and/or enhanced social and moral capitals that come from the experience of being at university. Lecturers in both modules emphasised both the usefulness and tangibility of critical thinking for academic study and professional competency and this was mirrored in student narratives:

If I was a critical thinker there would be no reason for me to turn up to the seminars. (Carly, I)

Carly's words directly parallel how the lecturers positioned critical thinking as a tangible skill that can be taught, learnt and assessed in the classroom. Following this, critical thinking had esteemed value as a form of intellectual capital, representing academic and professional success.

Notions of critical thinking's 'value' were strongly linked to disciplinary cultures, as [Section 8.2.1](#) describes. While in both modules critical thinking was presented as 'teachable', in the professional course it was introduced very gently – as something important but difficult and requiring careful guidance in order to get it 'right'. In the first session Jo (lecturer) said it was:

Too much to talk about today... we'll talk about the critical word later, we'll build up to it'. (PO)

She then stated that the critical review assessment gave $\frac{3}{4}$ of the marks to summarising and $\frac{1}{4}$ to 'the critical part' but that at the end of the year it should be the other way around and at that point 'we want much more critical thought'. One student responded 'so it doesn't need to contain your opinions?' and Jo said:

Critical thinking, analysis and reflection are important but we need to know you can summarise. Critical thinking comes after. (PO)

This emphasis on summarising and remaining open before a decision or judgement reflects the nature of the intervention cycle in the professional work environment. In this sense, students are both being guided towards pedagogical practices that have relevance to their academic discipline and being supported in their critical development through careful scaffolding. However this approach firmly places critical knowledge in the hands of the 'experts' to be delivered to students through teaching, learning and assessment practices, as a unique and superior product of higher education. This, along with the focus on critical thinking as 'tangible' strongly resonates with the performative drivers that Ball (2013) suggests, such as the need to clearly and continually restate education's outputs and value.

Furthermore, in both modules assessment discourses dominated and, while it was not the only notion framing student criticality, it appeared to hold the most weight. In the academic module, out of the twelve weeks, three workshops directly focused on the book review assessment, two weeks were given to tutorials to discuss (among other things) the draft book review and eight out of the ten workshops mentioned assignments more generally. More crucially, assessment was mentioned in the first session, right after an icebreaker and a brief introduction and, crucially, as a key direction 'most importantly...'

(Kathryn, AO) towards which the module progressed. Similarly in the professional module four out of six seminars and three out of five lectures mentioned the assessment. The reduced numbers were perhaps due to more substantive, and less academic-skills based, content. Yet the assessment was also mentioned in the first professional session. This is perhaps not surprising for modules intended to foster effective study habits for university learning, including writing academically and critically in assignments. It is also good practice in inclusive curriculum design to prepare students for the first assessment by introducing it early and offering plenty of opportunities to discuss concerns (HEA, 2011). Yet the dominance of assessment structuring success in the module is also indicative of student performative cultures, explored by Macfarlane (2014), where only what can be counted counts.

The ways in which ‘assessment’ became broadened out to include regulating social and emotional behaviours, is further symptomatic of the performative cultures of ‘soulcraft’ that Macfarlane (2014) also describes. For example, the use of assessed reflection in the professional module requires students to demonstrate their emotions in particular ways. In the first session Jo warns the students that this may make them feel silly or uncomfortable but - ‘*you have to trust us that this is important*’ (PO). In the seminar that followed, students revealed anxieties about exactly what emotion work is required:

In my reflective journal, some days I feel like Bridget Jones. I mean, how far do I go? Who cares? Should I just be constantly reflecting on the relevance it has to academic work? (Ellie, PO).

This worry about what to reveal and for what purpose resonates with Stevenson and Clegg’s (2012) research which found that the complexity of such public emotion work forced students to mimic reflection rather than confront the difficulties underlying reflection itself. This also supports Ball’s (2012) claim that neoliberal higher education creates specific performative demands where the focus becomes on saying, rather than doing. Furthermore, in the academic module, the measurement of attendance and participation also demanded certain kinds of demonstrative performances, defined as ‘*coming along and saying something*’ (Kathryn, AO). Such presenteeism, as Macfarlane (2014) discusses, turns critical learning into a public performance where there is no right to silence. Much of this is constructed through the ‘good feeling’ literature of student engagement, where students become part of learning communities and their non-participation judged negatively as anti-community or as ‘lurker’. While [Section 9.3](#) considers how students responded to such performative demands, it is important to emphasise here how neither module problematised such emotion work.

A final key feature of the teaching of critical thinking was that much of this was done, I feel, with good intentions, through enacting principles of critical feminist pedagogies. Yet as hooks (2009) states while many students are:

More comfortable with learning that allows them to remain *passive*, critical thinking requires all participants in the classroom process to be *engaged*. (p.10)

Thus lines between performative cultures and the positive messages of critical and feminist pedagogies become blurred as they become co-opted into the everyday business of teaching critical thinking. Indeed, all the teaching staff worked hard to construct themselves and their classrooms as supportive spaces for critical discussion:

You don't have to use the seminars to compete with each other; it's not like that...you are sharing bits of you... you can make mistakes, it is okay. (Jo, PO)

You are here to support each other... critical thinking is about being respectful and encouraging. (Kathryn, AO)

Despite this, the focus on assessing critical thinking meant that performing criticality, even via informal assessment in contexts deemed 'supportive', became subject to considerable anxieties:

The task to prepare for the professional seminar this week was to read and critique a journal article from a selection chosen by Jo and to bring a draft critical reflection on it to discuss in the group. We separated into two groups for discussion and I went with a group to a room across the corridor, away from Jo. As we started talking one student confessed that she'd only just realised that the article she'd critiqued in her reflection was one Jo had written. Her face went red and she seemed frustrated at herself for not realising sooner, saying 'how am I supposed to be critical of her...what will she think...what can I say'. She was hastily trying to read through her notes 'to check I haven't said something bad'. (PO)

While Jo and Kathryn regularly emphasised that '*tutors won't bite*' (Jo) and students should '*see their perspective as critical thinkers as equally valid*' and shouldn't be '*intimidated by thinking others know better*' (Kathryn, AO), in practice this was more complicated.

Partly this relates to the affective consequences of being critical and its close association with negativity, as [Chapter 7](#) discusses. It also challenges some of the 'good feelings' inherent in critical and feminist pedagogies which are heavily infused with unequal power relations, even if the purpose is to challenge and overcome these, as Morley (1998) discusses. Crucially, students' anxieties to get critical thinking 'right' intra-act with the dominance of assessment discourses to arguably amplify the unequal power relations between lecturers and students. Becky further exemplifies this in our interview:

You don't know when you are writing your essays whether you should agree with their [lecturers] side and what perspective they are because you don't know whether it might be quite good to challenge them. They might see it as a good thing. Whereas if you agree they might think yeah they have the same view as me that's good.

So while critical and feminist pedagogies are positioned by Canaan (2013) and others as being ideal for developing student criticality, they can sit problematically alongside neoliberal discourses of education's marketised value and learning's need to be tangibly evidenced, measured and performance managed. Indeed, when the considerable emotion work of reflection becomes described transparently and unproblematically and when critical thinking becomes positioned only as a tangible cognitive value, this leaves little space to explore how difficult it can be, particularly in relation to power differentials present in pedagogical relationships.

This short exploration of the critical thinking pedagogies employed in the academic and professional modules reveals the dominance of neoliberal vocabularies of assessment, value and performativity. Yet it is also important to emphasise that both modules were commendable examples of teaching and support for first-year students. While it is tempting to describe a context of neoliberal performative saturation on which to build an argument about the state of critical thinking in higher education, the complex arrangement of people, places and their knowledge practices (Barad, 2007, Fenwick & Edwards, 2013) make it less of a simple story. For example, the following section outlines how both students and academics are not simply ventriloquising a set of neoliberal principles and that other, potentially more troublesome, critical discourses are still present on campus.

9.2 FROM POLITICS TO PERFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY?

Barad (2012a) claims her students are so well trained in critical thinking that they can 'spit it out with the push of a button' (no-page). Here she points to instrumental critical thinking practices associated with pedagogies of assessment that Evans (2004) has argued increasingly dominate the neoliberal academy, domesticating and 'killing' critical thinking as a result. While it may not be as straightforward to argue that neoliberalism has led to the death of critical thinking, critical thinking has perhaps been negated towards being an instrumentalised, pedagogical performance indicator.

My observation note below describes a moment when the professional lecture about critical thinking was interrupted by a student protest on campus:

The professional lecture this week is on critical thinking. I notice an emphasis on critically as a form of introspective work on the self, both to challenge (and overcome?) the inherit bias of our value systems and to develop personal characteristics of openness and flexibility to be able to effectively judge truth claims in professional settings (objectively?). It feels quite psychological. About halfway through the session I hear noises outside - the din of a megaphone and muffled tones of a group chant - but it is hard to work out exactly what is going on. We are in a glass fronted building on the second floor but because the blinds are down I can't see anything. The students start looking outside. I remember that a student protest is happening today in solidarity for academic staff striking tomorrow. The lecturer, Judy, tells the group 'I think it is a student protest' and sounds frustrated, saying loudly 'tell me to shout it you can't hear'. I notice the class start to talk amongst themselves and Judy repeats impatiently 'can you hear me' and carries on reading from the slides. After a few minutes the voices die down and Judy continues.

The lecturer and students did not verbalise a connection between the forms of cerebral critical thinking described in the lecture and the lived activism outside. The lecturer was new and seemed mostly occupied with getting through the content so may not have noticed or wished to comment on the intersections of protest and critique on campus. Yet it spoke of a distance between critical thinking as it was presented in the lecture as a technology for assessment and other, more transgressive forms of criticality such as a political protest. They were, in effect, materialised as different objects.

What is more interesting is what happened next. The lecture on critical thinking was shorter than usual because the course leader had an announcement. He told students about funding cuts that meant that the majority of students would now no longer be eligible for financial support for their studies. After the lecture ended, there was a considerable buzz in the room, which carried over to the seminar. While the seminar was intended to be about critical writing, students instead talked about the funding cuts, how frustrated they were and what they could do about it. The lecturer, Ana, said to the group you will be '*bulldozed over unless you stand up*' and urged students to '*get together, discuss if you want to do something more proactive...we would support you*' (PO). The students agreed: '*I think we probably should. No one will listen to one person*' (Jennie, PO). Ellie, the student rep agreed to set up a discussion a topic on the online forum to start the ball rolling. Ana then asked whether students had heard of the student protests on campus. A few nodded, one responded '*I liked them on Facebook*'. Ana urged the students to read about it and get involved. A few students had written it down and, strikingly, this was the only writing that had taken place in the session, demonstrating its symbolic impact.

I spoke to Ana after the seminar about how students had been very critical in the seminar but in a different way to the ideas presented to them in the critical thinking

lecture and whether they would reconcile the two together as both being critical thinking. She responded *'maybe it's too soon for them to make that link, or maybe they never will'*. We both admitted feeling pleased and excited about the discussions that took place. Two key issues emerged from the above. The first is the distance Ana and Judy, (and potentially the students) placed between critical thinking as taught subject matter or as something more overtly transgressive and how this relates to the technologisation of criticality described by Barad (2007). The second is how certain constructions of criticality were affectively invested by Ana and I as pleasing and as happy objects (Ahmed, 2010b).

The critical thinking described in the lecture was materialised very differently by lecturers and students to the critical thinking of both the protest and seminar room discussion. In the lecture, critical thinking was described as judging quality of evidence in academic debates, creating and defending arguments and problem solving. Becoming critical was also seen as being about developing personal traits - but ones that can be learnt, including being a truth seeker, being open-minded, being responsible and having integrity. These traits are individualised and insular, requiring developing self-confidence - *'you need to trust yourself'* and exercising restraint by having a *'considered approach'* (Judy, PO). Such personal characteristics could then be used to interrogate biases and assumptions based on personal experiences. A 'critical' practice was discussed as being essential for their competency as future professionals, as well as for their academic success. This approach to criticality both as psychological work on the self and academic/professional habitus contrasts with the criticality expressed in the lived activism of the protest or the discontent in the seminar. The latter was about mobilising the affect of discontent as outward-facing, action-orientated, more overtly 'political', and enacted with or on behalf of others.

However, like critical thinking, 'politics' can take multiple forms - from loud protest to silent acts of resistance - and it is important not to glorify activism as the 'holy grail' of criticality. Indeed, while activism could also be constructed as internally motivated, it is similarly possible for cerebral thinking to become directed outwards to activism. For example, the focus on critical thinking for problem solving is often exemplified by the need to help others in a professional setting. Yet in relation to the professional course learning outcomes, this was not the kind of criticality that counted. Here, critical thinking was dominantly conceptualised as an academic skill and professional competency, demonstrated through specific behaviours associated with university learning and assessment e.g. the critical review assessment and the critical reflection in students'

reflective diaries. And yet, this observation moment and the seminar discussion revealed the vibrancy of critical thinking in the academy, confirming Staeheli *et al.* (2013) who argue that universities remain sites where 'young people often become politicised and use their critical thinking skills to challenge, rather than reproduce their communities' (p.92).

In the academic course some direct links were made between cerebral criticality and political activism. For example, the reasons for the protest on campus that week were explained to students in class and a short discussion followed where students were informed that they could come along and support it, if they wished. As discussed in [Chapter 8](#), this related to the specific intellectual values that the academic subject prioritised and affectively invested as valuable. The academic lecturer, Kathryn, emphasised that critical thinking was about political citizenship and for:

Defending ourselves against the monopolising interests of huge corporations and governments constantly trying to peddle us their view. To be socially responsible we need to ask question this and make judgements... to not just understand and reproduce but evaluate and challenge. (AO)

This rooting of criticality in the politics of social justice also reveals the left political values that constituted the specific apparatus of what being legitimately 'critical' looked like in the academic discipline. Yet students' opportunities to demonstrate their critical thinking in this module were also limited to formal and informal assessment e.g. via class presentations and the critical book review. The impact of knowledge being constructed around (and thus directed towards) assessment, which Evans (2004) describes, meant there was little space for anything else. This supports Rowland (2003) who described how lecturers across three national contexts of Russia, South Africa and Britain described their students as being 'apolitical', 'apathetic' and 'consumerist' (p.92). These lecturers felt that students did not share (or verbalise) their values of 'equality' and 'anti-prejudice' but that this was the fault of the institutions' adoption of instrumentalised, marketised pedagogies and practices, rather than because the nature of students has changed. Where the only critical thinking that counts in the neoliberal academy is that demonstrated through formal assessment, this has the potential to narrow the purpose and direction of critical thinking towards an instrumentalised, pedagogical performance indicator.

Because of the focus on the formal assessment of criticality in both cohorts, students appeared to take a systematic, instrumental approach to critical practices. In the focus

group, Bronwyn, a professional student, reflects about the role of critical thinking in her first-year studies saying:

We're being forced to think so much deeper. You know, you have to in order to fulfil the words and the learning outcomes.

Similarly in an interview with Tobias, an academic student, he talks about why he thinks critical thinking is important:

I think we have to critically analyse things to progress. If you don't then maybe you might not get above a certain mark or a certain grade.

For both Bronwyn and Tobias, critical thinking was strongly aligned with successful assessment performances. Consequently to maximise your intellectual investment, it seems logical to appropriate behaviours that lead to positive results. While student conscientiousness in relation to assessment is not 'neoliberal' in itself, as a consequence of the instrumental grammar surrounding criticality, students often described their critical thinking in highly instrumental ways. For example, in the academic seminar I spoke to a student about how her essay was going and she said '*it's almost done, I just need to put the critical bit in*' (Becky, AO). This made me think back to my experience working with students in learning development, introduced in [Chapter 1](#), where the most common question we would get from students would be '*is this critical enough?*' as if checking for criticality was akin to checking for correct grammar or spelling. While as [Chapter 6](#) discusses students often had multiple and conflicting understandings of criticality, the strong boundary drawn around critical thinking as a technology of assessment by Becky was perhaps a consequence of the dominance of discourses of education's measurable value.

While the notion of 'value' is not new to higher education because, for example, pedagogic relationships traditionally requires one giving approval or 'value' to another's work along a set of criteria – a narrowing occurs where critical thinking *only* becomes something to get 'right' within a practice of set boundaries, rather than a practice of questioning and pushing boundaries. This boxing in of critical thinking potentially closes down spaces of openness and uncertainty, which could be detrimental for educated debate around less tangible, messy questions, especially around questions of social justice or inequality. This conclusion supports Morrall and Goodman (2012) who argue that the 'insidious saturation of the university system with bureaucracy and managerialism' (p.1) has undermined critical thinking. They argue that students need learning that is transformative and draws on *multiple* understandings of critical thinking, rather than reliance on the dominance of instrumentalist approaches to analysis.

Furthermore, concerns for what critical thinking *should* be were reflected in how Ana and I felt pleased when students were enacting forms of criticality that we saw as being important to addressing broader concerns about the state of the professional discipline. We, like Canaan (2013), saw in these critical acts by students forms of resistance and this gave us 'revitalised hope' (p.43) in critical thinking. Indeed, the role of our affective investments in certain critical behaviours we deemed as being more powerful or legitimate, as well as our political values, shaped how we saw students' criticality. This reflects Ahmed's (2010b) work on the how affects circulate through objects positioned as 'happy' and how the affective domain shapes and reshapes our engagements in educational practices. It also reflects Barad's (2007) work on the apparatus discussed in [Chapter 8](#) as representing a specific way of seeing critical thinking constricted through a specific moment, context and set of values. For example, in the academic seminar, Kathryn's feminist socialist politics emerged, often implicitly, at regular points in the examples she uses. After one of the seminars we discuss the link between politics and critical thinking a bit more and I asked, for example, whether a student could get away with writing a 'critical' essay that was also sexist. In her response she describes how the department has a '*certain culture*' in which such views would not be tolerated and that this is what students are signing up for '*even if they don't know*' (PO). That there are implicit political values shaping disciplinary practices is not surprising because of the way students and teachers are embedded within subjectivities that cannot be stepped out of on entering the classroom.

Yet this creates a potential clash between the democratising politics allegedly inherent in such critical pedagogies and neoliberal discourses which position Kathryn as giving 'value' to students' demonstrations of critical thinking through her marking their assessments. The notion of critical thinking being affectively invested as a happy object through the reproduction of a specific set of valued critical behaviours also has implications for legitimising students and their critical thinking. For example, Todd (2011) discusses the paradox in transformative pedagogies of:

Wanting desperately for students to become free whilst also wanting to form and mould them' and asks 'what kind of freedom is this?' (p.509)

Todd is concerned that while critical thinking is fundamentally about developing an independent critical voice, it is simultaneously shaped and legitimated by the specific pedagogic apparatus of, for example, the values of the lecturer, the specific discipline and the institutional context. Staeheli *et al.* (2013) calls this the paradox of autonomy - whereby universities teach students to be critical but with the concurrent risk that this

critical gaze will turn upon the institution itself or towards values some in the institution would find problematic. Indeed there is no reason, following this logic, why critical thinking could not include a 'political' protest supporting neoliberal discourses of education. This aspect further emphasises the complex ways critical thinking in higher education is embedded and shaped by the people and places in which learning happens.

Yet the conceptualisation by Kathryn, Ana and I of critical thinking within discourses of counter-hegemonic politics highlights that, while performative cultures strongly shape student learning in higher education, neoliberalism is not the only ideology at work in the classrooms of higher education, which may provide some hope for Evans (2004) and others. Arguably to be within the academy and also to critique it, is fundamental to the critical hope agenda (Bozalek *et al.*, 2014).

As well as the clashes between lived activism and critical thinking for assessment; another key discourse was critical thinking as a passport for self-improvement. The introverted nature of this capacity arguably creates limits for thinking about more collective forms of critical thinking.

9.3 CRITICAL THINKING – A PASSPORT TO SELF IMPROVEMENT?

'It is important for this country to make its people so obsessed with their own liberal individualism that they do not have time to think about a world larger than self'

(hooks, 1999, no-page)

The focus on 'emotion work' in the critical thinking pedagogies of the two modules drew on specific enactments of self-surveillance (Davies, 2003) and self-investment (Brown, 2015) characterised as key to neoliberal selfhood. In such a context, critical thinking potentially becomes domesticated into an individualised and psychologised passport to self-improvement, with Hey and Leathwood (2009) concerned about the role of sociality and collectivism give such a shift. What appears to be at stake is when the emotion work associated with being critical becomes associated with something unproblematic that can be systematically put on the page as neat evidence of 'doing' emotion, whereby a commitment to self-improvement is an unproblematised and inherent part of the 'good life' (Berlant, 2011). Furthermore, when critical emotion work corresponds with reproducing a narrow set of 'superior' moral characteristics and, in particular, when critical *reflection* becomes more desirable than critical *resistance* this closes down available conceptual space for critical thinking. This reflects David and Clegg's (2008) concern that while emotion work and personalisation has become incorporated into

pedagogical discourse, it is built on an unproblematised impersonal and disembodied subject, obscuring important feminist concerns with inequality and power.

Firstly, as [Section 8.2.1](#) discussed, many of the professional students in particular, allied themselves with a view of critical thinking as a process of critical reflection of who they are and their place in the world. This then gets tied up with notions of self-improvement as Teresa and Emma, both professional students, discuss in our interviews:

I think my perception of critical thinking is that you can use it quite personally. You can use it to your advantage if you like look at a situation where you've acted in you can then think 'oh I did that well or I didn't' and you can work on it...critical thinking it can be really good for improving yourself. (Emma, I)

It gives you the opportunity to think and reflect on your experiences and your ideas ... and how your thinking can change...when you go into work, again you won't stop doing critical thinking. Because I think it helps you develop as a person I guess... And it also gives you the opportunity to open your mind and think about what you are doing...I feel it's a really good process because it helps me, I dunno, realise who I am, like, my identity. (Teresa, I)

Emma sees critical reflection as a way to build on previous experiences to progress and develop in relation to her personal and professional identity. Similarly, Teresa narrates how critical thinking helps her think about who she is and how she can continually better herself. Such perspectives mirror the kinds of things the professional lecturers said about critical reflection and self-improvement:

[Critical thinking] can improve you as a person; enable you to be clearer about what you are doing and how you fit within the wider idea of things. (Judy, PO)

Critical thinking and reflection become inseparable as a force for self-betterment. Consequently, students are encouraged from the first lecture onwards to keep a reflective diary, sections of which will be submitted for assessment. This formed a particular feature of the professional course, however the use of the reflective diary technique is also drawn upon in the academic classroom, although this was not assessed.

Despite this common-sense notion that critical reflection for self-improvement is a 'good thing', such emotion work is not unproblematic. For example, as Ellie mentioned earlier in her reference to Bridget Jones, being reflective involves crafting a vision of who you are and how you publically speak about yourself, which draws on cultural references to diary keeping, affective investments of self-revelation and being aware of the 'rules of the game' for the assessment of your emotional performance. As Macfarlane (2014) argues, higher education classrooms require a specific demonstration of emotion and critical reflection that is embodied and contextually specific and, crucially, rarely problematised.

For example, it is not a simple case of digging in to our private selves and laying it out our critical reflection on the page or in the classroom discussion but involves more complex and contextual pedagogic intra-actions.

Furthermore, psychologising critical thinking in this way has the potential to make it internalised and self-referential. For example, practices of critical thinking for self-improvement draw on the cultural dominance of the positive thinking society and its focus on individual betterment through developing characteristics such as optimism, will or motivation (Ehrenreich, 2010). This tendency links to debates about the role of positive psychology and the happiness 'industry' which gives cultural importance to self-improvement through 'thinking it out'. Indeed, this focus on individualising and psychologising critical reflection, as opposed to thinking critically about broader structural forces such as inequality of opportunity, is particularly symptomatic of neoliberal conceptions of individual subjectivity and responsibility.

However, while all the teaching staff raised the difficulties with trying to understand personal and professional identities through critical reflection – such difficulties did not make the practice of critical reflection optional. Instead, performing critical reflection becomes a key part of performing successful student identity. Indeed, to not engage, as Jo states, is to risk being '*a dangerous practitioner*' (PO). This, along with Emma and Teresa's quote, cements the strong link between doing such emotion work (and investing in it as a good practice) and becoming 'better' students and professionals. Yet the circulation of such disciplinary emotional practices as unproblematic happy objects, as Ahmed (2010) discusses, can obscure the way such practices reproduce normative values. For example, it requires adopting a specific emotional vocabulary of student-hood, which Macfarlane (2014) argues:

Demands an oral and textual enactment of the private and the personal, domesticating, rather than empowering students as free and independent thinkers. (p. 10)

The internalised direction of such emotion work draws on broader neoliberal notions of individual performativity. For example, the need to continually develop and demonstrate the 'brand called you' dominates continual professional development in most people-centred professional disciplines such as in Education and Healthcare (e.g. National Union of Teachers, 2016, British Association of Social Workers, 2016). Davies (2003) is critical of the way that this creates the 'continually-changing individual' (p.93) whose self-surveillance through a 'multiplied gaze' (p.92) turns direction away from critique of the

broader system of new managerialist governance. This is exemplified in the way Ana connects criticality to self-protection, as well as self-improvement in saying:

The workplace we are preparing you for is dire...you need to know how to challenge that appropriately...reflection can help you learn what works for you and why...and look after yourself. (PO)

Here, emotion work is given a huge amount of significance for personal and professional survival. While I am certain that Ana is conscious of preparing students realistically for the world of work, it does direct their critical attentions towards *reflection* rather than *resistance*. I felt this was particularly problematic in relation to the futures of the students entering a profession with a high staff turnover due to increased workloads, funding cuts and intense media scrutiny. It also confirms hooks' (1999) and Hey and Leathwood's (2009) concerns that if attention is continually turned inwards, to critical introspection, it closes down space for looking outwards, toward critical (and collective) social change – potentially domesticating criticality's transformative power.

Finally, the positioning of criticality as an individualised passport to success in the knowledge economy also relates to debates about the gendered nature of emotional literacy. Hayes (2005) argues that emotion work increasingly dominates the classrooms of higher education and that this focus on '*the affective side of learning...undermines hard critical thinking*' (no-page). However, Leathwood and Read (2009) view this perspective in relation to the hard/soft and rational/emotional gendered dichotomy that persists in understandings of university knowledge practices. They also draw some parallels between concerns about the therapeutic support culture in the classroom and a moral panic over the feminisation of higher education – the notion that women are taking over universities both in their numeric representation as well as through changing cultures and practices. In such a context, emotion work such as critical reflection become unproblematically associated with a form of 'feminine habitus' and subsequently devalued (Adkins, 2002). Concern over the rise of the 'touchy feely' stuff has become synonymous with debates about the dumbing-down of higher education – whereby women's success becomes positioned as a result of changing soft standards, rather than a 'golden age' of hard intellectual rigour. Not only does the neoliberal academy act to close down spaces for critical thinking through the limits of economic or psychologised analogies, it is always worth remembering that such spaces are already limited for some more than others.

9.4 CONCLUSION - DEAD, DUMBED DOWN OR DISCONTENTED?

This chapter explored the state of critical thinking in the neoliberal academy. However, the complex and entangled practices that define both critical thinking and neoliberalism mean that it is difficult to make definite conclusions about cause and effect. Neoliberalism's role in the academy did not appear as a definite set of behaviours or values that staff or students ventriloquised. Instead, it appeared to offer a vocabulary and a conceptual order. This was firstly about the circulation of economic analogies for understanding education's practices as valuable or value-less e.g. through notions of assessment, performance and getting critical thinking 'right'. Secondly, it involved continual demonstration of such value through cultures of performativity e.g. through normalised, public performance of critical reflection in the classroom. Such a context arguably provides a limited vocabulary within which the vibrancy of critical thinking can be understood. Yet this chapter simultaneously exemplified students engaging in and responding to critical protest, thinking critically about building arguments in their assessments and critically reflecting on their lives and futures. For example, I described how the two modules fostered criticality as a central part of their pedagogies and noted how other, counter-hegemonic, discourses circulated too. Thus despite critical thinking's contested state, this chapter testifies how it is very much alive in the academy.

Yet what critical thinking is and whether students are demonstrating in ways expected by their lecturers and peers is subject to discontent. There is a sense in which becoming critical sits uneasily with dominant neoliberal discourses in higher education. For example, economic vocabularies provide a limited grammar for understanding the contextual and contingent nature of critical thinking. Where the only criticality that counts is related to assessment, criticality becomes an instrumentalised performance in response. Arguably this domesticates (and dumbs down) critical thinking to something to get right within a practice of set boundaries (e.g. a learning outcome), rather than a practice of questioning and pushing boundaries. Secondly, where critical thinking has become internalised as psychological work on the self this acts to turn the focus inwards towards the continual self-surveillance characteristic of the neoliberal performative self. Arguably, a politics of individualised reflection over collective resistance acts to close down criticality's potential for action, particularly on behalf of others - concerns that, I feel, should dominate the educational philosophies of public higher education institutions. Thinking about the state of critical thinking in higher education therefore raises broader questions than about the values higher education

should foster in its graduates and the space (or lack of) for diverse enactments of critical thinking (from activism to academic writing) within this.

Moving towards the thesis' conclusion, I offer two closing thoughts. That a higher education campus can be alive with student activism (and other forms of critical vibrancy) alongside neoliberal technologies, means there is remains space for both hope as well as gloom. Indeed, as Brown (2015) describes, there are other rationalities and discourses rubbing up against neoliberalism, particularly from students disillusioned with their identities as human capital. Yet because critical thinking is problematic for all the reasons detailed above, it can be easy to feel despair at what it offers students, enacted within and through the entire neoliberal academy's restrictions. Indeed, it is hard to separate the affective investment in the optimism of critical thinking with the notion that as academics and students, we could be investing in something that is highly problematic. This, as Berlant (2011) suggests, could be a cruel optimism – a commitment to something that could be bad for us. Yet I am inspired by the notion of 'critical hope' (Bozalek *et al.*, 2014) posed in response to such notions of despair that characterise fights for social justice (as well as the feelings of doing and being critical). Here, hope is evoked a way to continue to imagine new possibilities whilst at the same time continually problematising what can be hoped for and how it can be made possible. In relation to critical thinking, despite it being squeezed of conceptual space, students arguably are critically engaged as ever and such spaces of resistance give potential for reimagining critical thinking in and about the neoliberal academy in ways, as Segalov (2013) notes, that move beyond limited economic discourses for conceptualising higher education's value and values.

10. CONCLUSION – RE-THINKING CRITICALLY: UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS, CRITICAL THINKING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

This study has re-thought undergraduate students' critical thinking in higher education through an exploration of what critical thinking *is*, what it *does* and what it means to *be* a critical thinker. Using feminist, poststructuralist and new-materialist thinking, particularly drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed and Karen Barad, it challenges individualised, decontextualised, rationalist and skills approaches to critical thinking by emphasising the complex interconnections between critical thinkers, their identities and their context. Thus rather than understanding *doing* critical thinking as a set of tangible, transferrable and measurable skills and competencies, this thesis reimagines *becoming* critical as a highly contextualised, contingent and embodied set of practices. This analysis emerged from qualitative research with two cohorts of first-year undergraduate social science students collected via interviews with fifteen students, three-months of loosely structured, participantish classroom observation and a focus group with four students - bringing a purposely student-focused, and therefore unique, perspective to critical thinking scholarship.

This concluding chapter summarises each chapter's contribution before offering four key analytical conclusions in response to the original research questions. I end by re-stating the analytical and political power of critical, feminist work for researching the sociology of higher education and, specifically, the need to turn further attention towards theorising critical thinking and other similar seemingly good, seemingly neutral, everyday intellectual values of higher education.

10.1 THESIS SUMMARY

[Chapter 1](#) introduced my motivations for undertaking the research and outlined the thesis structure. Following this, [Chapter 2](#) described the contemporary policy context of UK higher education in which my thesis is situated, including key policy developments of massification and marketisation and their resulting cultural shifts in the reconceptualisation of higher education as a private, rather than a public, good. This chapter argued that, while market logics are not in themselves inherently bad, when they become the only - or the dominant - ideologies constructing higher education's pedagogies and practices, they provide a limited vocabulary for understanding the vibrancy and potential of students and their critical thinking.

[Chapter 3](#) reviewed the received scholarship on critical thinking, describing the multitude of definitions of what it *is* and is *for*. While this chapter highlighted the vast

and diverse literature about critical thinking, it also revealed the distinct lack of work that looks at what students, and specifically undergraduates, have to say about critical thinking. Consequently, I argued for further scholarship that - rather than focusing on defining criticality or measuring its effectiveness - is instead attentive to the complexity and contingency of becoming critical in higher education. I described how these gaps are met through my research contribution, which is both student-focused and explores how critical thinking is contextual, complex and embodied.

[Chapter 4](#) described the theoretical provocations offered by poststructuralist and new-materialist feminist thinking. Specifically, I examined how the clashes and connections in Sara Ahmed and Karen Barad's work inspired my thinking about critical thinking, as well as the emergent possibilities that come from 'plugging in' theory with research data (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Here I argued that a specifically *feminist* sociological analysis of critical thinking allows both a deeper exploration of how critical thinking legitimates itself through different bodies and identities, as well how it gets constituted through the structures of power and inequality in higher education.

[Chapter 5](#) outlined my qualitative research design and explained how I planned, conducted and analysed the data. I explained why I chose to focus on the chosen institution, subject disciplines and students and the epistemological and ontological framing informing my use of observation, interviews and a focus group. In thinking through my methodological decision making, I also described how my research was 'entangled in complex affective and political rationalities' and how 'affect and researcher positionality permeated the research process at every stage' (Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p.772).

The first of four analytical chapters, [Chapter 6](#), demonstrated how students had multiple, often conflicting, understandings of critical thinking that were closely bound up with other aspects of their subjectivities and educational experiences. This chapter challenged the notion of critical thinking as a rational, cognitive technology by describing how students' engagements with what it might mean to be a critical thinker were strongly marked by notions of both complexity and contingency. Using Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action, I argued that critical thinking should be understood as an entanglement of social-material-discursive knowledge practices in higher education, which students continually reproduce and are inseparable from.

[Chapter 7](#) explored the affective intensities that emerged by students doing critical thinking. Using Barad's (2007) work on the social-material-discursive and Ahmed's

(2010b) theorisation of the affective consequences of counter-hegemonic subjectivities, I described how students' worked within these complex affects in negotiating practices of critical thinking in their first-year at university. This chapter revealed how critical thinking is not a simplistic action of cognitive cause and emotional effect but an entangled process of *becoming* critical which produces intense and conflicting affects. Furthermore, because students were deeply concerned about voicing their criticality *right* and in the right *place* and *space*, this suggests that, rather than it being a neutral pedagogic act, there are complex social and material contexts that construct when and why critical thinking feels good and bad.

[Chapter 8](#) unpacked the disembodied notion of a 'critical thinker' using Barad and Ahmed's feminist theorisations. I considered who is allowed to be critical i.e. who occupies a legitimate critical physical body in higher education and how such bodies are re-shaped by dominant discourses about power, authority and legitimacy. This chapter focused specifically on the role of maturity, subject discipline and gender (and the inherent nuances and problematics within these categories) in shaping the conditions of possibility required for performing critical behaviours deemed legitimate. That, for example, 90% of students named a mature and masculine figure when asked to describe a critical thinker, led to the conclusion that those positioned as 'Others' in higher education potentially have more work to do to become recognised as legitimate critical thinkers, compared to those traditionally 'at home' (Ahmed, 2012, p.122) within the academy.

Finally, [Chapter 9](#) explored the state of critical thinking in the neoliberal academy. Using feminist higher education scholarship (e.g. Davies, 2003, Evans, 2004), I analysed the consequences of the rise of both technologised and psychologised approaches to critical learning and outlined how neoliberal higher education produces an increasingly narrow economic vocabulary for talking about education's value and values and thus a limited grammar for understanding the contextual and contingent nature of critical thinking. I concluded that, rather than being 'dead' in higher education, critical thinking has become domesticated and instrumentalised as something to perform and get 'right' within a practice of set boundaries, rather than a practice of questioning and pushing boundaries - with considerable philosophical and political consequences.

10.2 RESPONDING TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS: KEY ANALYTICAL CLAIMS

10.2.1 HOW IS CRITICAL THINKING DEFINED?

Conclusion 1: Critical thinking is not a simply defined cognitive act of reasoned bodies but a complex set of social, material and discursive practices that students reproduce and are inseparable from.

The research noted fifteen different definitions of critical thinking in the data, with all the students interviewed subscribing to more than one definition concurrently, even where they appeared to contradict each other. Critical thinking is therefore not a universal or simplistic practice of thinking and action or a decontextualised and individualised act of 'reasoned' bodies. Instead I argue, along with Fenwick and Edwards (2013), that critical thinking is a complex set of social, material and discursive practices and that the experience of it shifts in accordance with the social, embodied and relational contexts in which one is entangled at any particular moment. Furthermore, critical thinking is not a simple *doing* but a complex and contingent act of *becoming* that gets constituted through specific apparatus of what critical thinking and critical thinkers are like, from which students are inseparable.

10.2.2 HOW DO DIVERSE GROUPS OF STUDENTS E.G. BY DISCIPLINE, SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES ENGAGE WITH THE CONCEPT OF CRITICAL THINKING?

Conclusion 2: Students don't just *do* critical thinking, they *feel* it. Critical thinking is a deeply affective experience, marked by intensities of both anxieties over embodying a negative killjoy persona and excitement over its potential transformative power.

Critical thinking is an intensely affective experience - the students did not simply do it, they *felt* it and critical thinking was always encountered as an affective experience of some kind, even if it seemed tempered or neutral. Critical thinking's affects appeared to flow, to be produced in relation to others, things and bodies, and to reveal themselves through specific moments or 'affective intensities' in the data (Ringrose & Renold, 2014, p.772). Students appeared to *feel their way through* the complex affects of both desiring the transformative power of criticality whilst also wishing to disassociate from its negativity. Because students struggled not simply with the academic language of critical thinking, but also the tensions of what it meant to embody a 'critical' persona, this demonstrates how becoming a critical thinker is not a simplistic act of thought and

action but deeply entangled processes of *becoming* critical which produces intense, conflicting affects.

Conclusion 3: Critical beings are not neutral subjects but gendered, classed and racialised beings. Becoming a critical thinker is inseparable from the ways bodies are unequally positioned in the academy.

Critical thinking is not undertaken by generic ‘critical beings’ but critical bodies located in the particularities of their social characteristics and the multiple intersecting impacts of these of these differences upon their own experiences. Furthermore, what it means to embody a critical thinker and for that critical body to be legitimised - is shaped through powerful, normative discourses about both critical knowledge and higher education students. Because bodies are unequally positioned in the academy as a result of historicised classed, racialised and gendered discourses, what a critical thinker ‘looks like’ similarly gets reimagined along normative lines and appears to settle more easily around traditional ‘ideal’ student bodies – as theorised by Leathwood and O’Connell (2003). This makes becoming and feeling legitimate as a critical thinker in higher education more problematic for marginalised students than those traditionally ‘at home’ (Ahmed, 2012, p.122) in the academy.

Conclusion 4: Critical thinking is not dead! However, opportunities for critical thinking are increasingly narrowed by the dominance of neoliberal vocabulary for conceptualising higher learning.

The neoliberal academy constructs education’s practices as valuable or value-less using economic analogies that require the continual demonstration and measurement of such value. This increasingly narrow economic vocabulary provides a limited grammar for understanding the embodied, contextual and contingent nature of critical thinking. While critical thinking is alive in students and in the academy, it is being squeezed of conceptual space through the dominance of assessment discourses, the narrow positioning of critical thinking as a tangible learning outcome and the notion of critical thinking as internalised self-surveillance. Critical thinking has therefore become domesticated and instrumentalised, resulting in a narrowing of students’ opportunities for being critical in (and importantly *about*) the neoliberal higher education system.

10.3 PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATONS

Towards the end of thesis writing, I started teaching again. Although I am not tasked specifically with teaching critical thinking, as I faced the lecture theatre full of first-year

students and engaged with them in seminars, this challenged me to consider the extent to which I practice the critical practices I preach. Todd (2011) states that:

How one writes about justice and how one lives it is no simple task and sometimes they pull in opposite directions. (p.508)

Thus while I am conscious that it is not always easy to continually invest idealism and energy in developing students' critical faculties while being subjected to the everyday constraints of teaching, I wanted to reflect on whether I may now do things differently - linking back to the pedagogical concerns described in [Chapter 1](#) that sparked my original motivations for undertaking the research. The following recommendations come from my initial reflections on what an effective pedagogy for supporting students' critical thinking might look like given the analytical conclusions described above. However, because this did not form a key part of the research design, these require further thinking and represent a space for future research.

Firstly, in my own teaching practice I have become more aware of the emotional and contextual subtext structuring getting critical thinking *right*. I would therefore create space in the classroom to discuss the difficulties inherent in *becoming* critical and *becoming* a student. I would also encourage my diverse student body to reimagine themselves as critical thinkers, as a political and epistemic challenge to dominant notions of how knowledge and criticality are embodied. More practically, I would take care in considering my own assumptions and unpick the apparatus influencing what critical thinking looks like to me a lecturer working in a specific discipline. I would clearly articulate to students how their critical thinking gets judged through academic assessment and provide multiple examples of how this can be done successfully but differently. Finally, I would work collectively with colleagues to encourage them to do the same in order to foster a departmental and institutional ethos of a critical culture of inquiry. Most crucially I remain, with Bozalek *et al.* (2014), invested in hope for critical thinking as a fundamental pedagogical concept of higher education, whilst continuing to render visible the problematics it raises.

10.4 A CRITICAL, FEMINIST REIMAGINING OF CRITICAL THINKING

In drawing to a conclusion, I want to re-emphasise why it is important to *trouble* critical thinking (and other taken for granted pedagogical concepts in higher education) and the significance and exploratory power of using critical, feminist sociological thinking to analyse the academic world.

Firstly, 'following around' (Ahmed, 2012) critical thinking, allowed a depth of exploration of an everyday, often unproblematised, pedagogical concept that is 'part of the furniture' in the academy. As higher education becomes increasingly imagined *only* through neoliberal discourses of measurable value, this conceptually positions critical thinking (and other similar pedagogical techniques such as reflection, independent learning, group work, employability etc.) as disembodied technologies, obscuring how learning in higher education is complex, contingent and embodied. It is therefore significant for future research to continually 'trouble' the seemingly good, seemingly neutral intellectual values of the academy – moving beyond interpretations of what they *are*, towards re-thinking what they *do* (both to bodies and to institutions).

Secondly, my thesis represents a critical, feminist reimagining of critical thinking, highlighting the exploratory power of such theorisations for the sociology of higher education. It also demonstrates how poststructuralist and new-materialist feminist thinking can be used productively together to focus deeply on the interconnections between critical thinkers and their social and institutional contexts and towards the acts of boundary making that constitute practices of criticality and what and who they include/exclude. Consequently, this thesis argues that critical thinking should be conceptualised not as the product of detached, 'reasoned' bodies competing with each other for intellectual supremacy but of embodied learners entangled with the world and produced through its affects. In so doing, this opens up space to re-think the imperfection and limitations of all views of the world and subsequently create pedagogical contexts that generate more critical and ethical questions about the ways we are co-entangled and co-implicated. Crucially, this also allows a re-thinking of fundamentally political questions about who is included/excluded by higher education and its pedagogies.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: MAP OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research question	Sub-questions	How will it be answered?	Underlying theoretical questions
How is critical thinking defined?	What is the genealogy of the term?	Literature review, interviews and focus group discussions with students about their engagements with critical thinking, observation of critical thinking pedagogies for disciplinary traditions	Where did the term come from and why is it important in higher education?
	What are its cognitive, social, political, ethical and emotional aspects?	Literature review, interview questions about definitions and experience of critical thinking, observation of critical thinking pedagogies, focus group discussions	Do theoretical issues match with the aspects identified as experienced by individuals? To what extent is this a cognitive, social, political, ethical or emotional concept?
	What expectations do students have about critical thinking?	Interviews with first-year students about their expectations, focus group discussing their expectations at the end of the first-year	In what way(s) do students understand things differently and does their starting point at university influence this?
	How do students express the impact of critical thinking on their lives and learning?	Interview and focus groups discussions.	What explanatory power does critical thinking have, if at all, to understanding the value of higher education?
How do diverse groups of students e.g. by discipline, social characteristics and previous educational experiences engage with the concept of critical thinking?	How are students' understandings re/shaped by different contexts (e.g. institutional, disciplinary) different structures (e.g. gender, class and race) and pedagogical relations and practices?	Interviews and focus groups considering the motivators and barriers shaping being critical at university. Observations to inform pedagogical context.	How does institutional, disciplinary, pedagogical and structural contexts influence students' experiences of critical thinking?

APPENDIX 2: STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA IN RELATION TO COHORT

Category	Number in academic student participant cohort (7)	Number in whole academic cohort	Number in professional student participant cohort (8)	Number in whole professional cohort
Home	7 (100%)	40 (87%)	7 (100%)	44 (98%)
Overseas	0 (0%)	6 (13%)	1 (13%)	1 (2%)
Mature	0 (0%)	6 (13%)	5 (63%)	29 (64%)
Male	2 (29%)	8 (17%)	2 (25%)	7 (16%)
Female	5 (71%)	38 (83%)	6 (75%)	38 (84%)
First-Generation	4 (57%)	17 (37%)	6 (75%)	7 (16%)

Although the sample were not intended to be representative, it is worth outlining how the group who took part relate to their cohort in order to tell us something about both about how 'typical' the students I spoke to were and why they chose to self-select as participants.

Academic cohort

- I did not manage to speak to any international students. This could relate to nerves about volunteering for additional activities when international students already have to adapt to the linguistic, social and academic practices of studying abroad.
- Mature students were also underrepresented, perhaps for similar reasons to above.
- First-generation students were over-represented. I asked the participants whether they were the first in their family to attend university. However the data for the whole cohort related to specific first-generation funding requirements, which may have other additional criteria that I am unaware of. However if this was not the case it could be due to such 'non-traditional' students feeling an enhanced sense of needing to 'prove' their worth within the academy by taking part or about wanting to discuss their developing criticality with someone as a result of being unconfident in their abilities.

- Although it is a female dominated course, I managed to speak to 2 male students, which proportionally is quite good. However I did struggle to recruit male students and had to approach them individually.

Professional cohort

- In terms of international/home student status and numbers of mature students, the participant cohort is reflective of the whole professional cohort.
- The gender mix is also fairly typical although again I had to approach male students individually as none came forward initially.
- The numbers of first-generation students is skewed as above, perhaps for the same reasons detailed above.

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Let's start with some questions about your reasons for attending university and for choosing your subject:

- What made you decide to go to university?
- What were your aspirations for higher education?
- What are your first impressions of university so far – any shocks/surprises?
- What made you decide to choose to study X?
- What impact, if any, do you believe studying X will have on how you think?

I'm interested to hear more about your views on critical thinking in particular...

- Apart from my email to you, have you come across the term 'critical thinking' before? What does it mean to you?
- Why, if at all, do you believe critical thinking is important?
- What do you think the key characteristics of a critical thinker are? OR What do you think differentiates a critical thinker from a non-critical thinker?
- Do you think some people (as a consequence of their identity or experiences) find critical thinking easier than others? If so, why?
- In what way(s), if at all, do you consider yourself to be a critical thinker?
- Can you give me an example of a time you thought critically?
- What did it feel like? What were the consequences?
- What kinds of social or political issues are you passionate about?
- In what ways, if at all, have you thought critically about them?
- Can you give me an example of a time you wanted to question something but didn't? Can you talk me through your decision?
- Who do you think has influenced you to think critically?

Now I'd like to return to thinking about your course and its influence on your thinking...

- Have you been asked to speak, think or write critically in your course so far? If so, how did it go? If not, what are your thoughts about doing it?
- Looking at the study skills module in particular, what influence, if any, is this having on the development of your critical thinking?
- Apart from this module, how else you been educated as a critical thinker?
- Looking to the future now, how, if at all, do you believe your thinking will develop or change throughout the rest of your university experience?

APPENDIX 4: FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE AND CASE STUDIES

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Do you think you've got what you paid for in terms of the development of your critical thinking skills this year? In what way(s)?
2. In the past year, when has being critical being successful for you?
3. In the past year, when has being critical been unsuccessful for you?

Discussion of case studies:

4. What is going on here?
5. In what way(s), if at all, do you think being critical is riskier for certain people or groups than others?
6. What factors contribute to making being a critical thinker high or low risk?
7. In what way(s), if at all, do these critical thinking case studies relate to your own experience(s)?
8. How do they make you feel about being a critical thinker now and in the future?

Closing questions:

9. What key message or phrase are you left with about critical thinking at the end of this discussion?
10. In what way(s), if at all, has taking part in this research impacted on your understanding of critical thinking?

FOCUS GROUP CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: Caroline Criado-Perez's Campaign for Jane Austen on the Bank Note

Feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez successfully campaigned for the British writer Jane Austen to feature on the bank note stating that 'an all-male line-up on our banknotes sends out the damaging message that no woman has done anything important enough to appear'. Although her online petition received 35,000 signatures, she received 50 abusive tweets an hour for a 12-hour period including rape and death threats and one calling her a "dumb blond bitch".

Case Study 2: Misogyny in University Debate

At the final of a debating competition at Glasgow University, two students, Rebecca Meredith from Cambridge University and Marlena Valles from Edinburgh University were subjected to sexist heckling. Comments from the crowd included 'what qualifications does a woman possibly have to be here' and 'shame on women'. When a female student in the crowd confronted one of the hecklers, she was called a 'frigid bitch'. Rebecca Meredith was told that it was 'to be expected' that women would be booed. When she asked racial minority speakers would be treated in the same way, I was told 'they would be booed too, but we don't have them here'.

Case Study 3: Katie Hopkins on Food Banks

Newspaper columnist and former reality TV star Katie Hopkins caused controversy when she wrote about food banks for The Huffington Post. She says 'of course there are genuine food bank users. But the massive growth in these food banks is not because more people are hungry. It is largely because we are feeding the dirty habits of people perfectly happy to live a life on the take'. She later said on Twitter 'freedom of speech where people are only permitted to say the acceptable is no freedom at all'.

APPENDIX 5: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE**Doctoral Research: Critical Thinking in Higher Education**

Thank-you for agreeing to take part in my research. You will have been provided with an information sheet with further details on the whole project. The purpose of this survey is to collect some background information about you, in order that I have a diverse sample of participants. All information from the survey will be kept confidential. If you have any questions, please email e.danvers@sussex.ac.uk

1. What course are you studying at university?**2. What is your student status?**

- ☐ Home student
- ☐ EU student
- ☐ International student

3. What is your mode of study?

- ☐ Full-time student
- ☐ Part-time student

4. Were you aged 21 years or over when you started this course of study?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

5. Were you the first generation of your family to go to university (not including siblings)?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Not sure (please explain)

6. What is your gender?

☐ Female

☐ Male

Other (comment optional)

7. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Comment (optional)

8. If I don't already have your email address, please include it below

Thank-you very much for taking the time to provide this information. I will email you to let you know whether you have been selected to take part in the research.

APPENDIX 6: INFORMATION SHEETS AND CONSENT FORMS

INTERVIEW INFORMATION SHEET

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Title of research project:

An exploration of undergraduate students' experiences of critical thinking in higher education

Description of research project:

The ability to think critically is increasingly viewed as a key attribute of university graduates and part of the added value of pursuing a higher education degree. In this research, I am interested in exploring first-year university students' experiences of thinking about and applying critical thinking including - how students define critical thinking, if and where students think they experienced it and what expectations, if any, they have about its impact on their education and life after university. I also hope to consider how students' ideas about critical thinking are shaped by factors including educational and life experiences, subject discipline and emotional and social concerns.

About the researcher:

My name is Emily Danvers and I am studying for a PhD at the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) at the University of Sussex. I have previously taught academic-skills to university students and I am passionate about student learning, the student experience and equity and diversity in higher education.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You are a first-year student and you are studying one of the two subjects I have identified as being interesting for my study. I am hoping that 14 students will participate in total.

Do I have to take part?

Not at all - participation in the study is entirely voluntary. If you do agree to take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form making it clear what you are taking part in and what that means for you. You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with and you can also withdraw from the research without giving a reason.

What are the benefits of taking part?

This is an opportunity for you to reflect on your first-year of learning at university and to add your voice to a body of knowledge about university learning to support future higher education students. Taking part in research also gives you an insider view on what research is and how it is created which may help you with your own research in the future.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part, I will need to collect some basic background information in order that I have a sample of participants that reflects the diversity of the student body. If you are selected, I will invite you for an interview in October 2013, which will take around an hour. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and written notes will be taken. The recordings will be transcribed and copies of the transcription will be emailed to you for your approval and comment, before I start analysing the data. However, once I have started data analysis on 1st August 2014 it will not be possible to withdraw the information that has already been included.

Will my information be kept confidential?

What we talk about in the interviews and what you write to me in the emails will become the data I use to answer my research questions. For example, I am likely to use direct quotes from our discussions. However, the name of the institution and subject you are studying will be anonymised. You can choose a pseudonym and other identifying features will be changed so as not to reveal your identity. Also, copies of the interview recordings, transcripts and any notes I take will all be stored securely, in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

What will happen to the results?

The results of this research will be used in my thesis for a Ph.D. in Education. This thesis will enter the public domain once it is submitted to the University in October 2015. With your permission, the data from this research may be used in conference presentations and academic journal articles. If you are interested, it would be great to keep in touch so I can send you my findings.

Who can I contact for further information?

If you have a question about any aspect of taking part in the research please let me know, as I am happy to address any concerns, however small. However, if you would like to speak to someone else, please contact my supervisor, Professor Louise Morley.

Researcher Contact Details:

Emily Danvers

University of Sussex

Department of Education

Essex House 128

Brighton, UK BN1 9QQ

e.danvers@sussex.ac.uk

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/306034>

Supervisor Contact Details:

Professor Louise Morley

University of Sussex

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Essex House 126

Brighton, UK BN1 9QQ

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<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/23457>

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

OBSERVATION INFORMATION SHEET

As part of my PhD research, I will be conducting classroom observations of the module XXX. I may be in one of your classes so it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Title of research project:

An exploration of undergraduate students' experiences of critical thinking in higher education

Description of research project:

The ability to think critically is increasingly viewed as a key attribute of university graduates and part of the added value of pursuing a higher education degree. In this research, I am interested in exploring first-year university students' experiences of thinking about and applying critical thinking including - how students define critical thinking, if and where students think they experienced it and what expectations, if any, they have about its impact on their education and life after university. I also hope to consider how students' ideas about critical thinking are shaped by factors including educational and life experiences, subject discipline and emotional and social concerns. The research will use a mixture of face-to-face interviews, classroom observation and a focus group with first-year students studying two different subjects.

About the researcher:

My name is Emily Danvers and I am studying for a PhD at the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) at the University of Sussex. I have previously taught academic-skills to university students and I am passionate about student learning, the student experience and equity and diversity in higher education.

Why are you observing us?

You are a first-year student studying one of two subjects that I have identified as being interesting for my study. I am particularly focusing on the module XXX as it aims to introduce you to principles of learning in higher education, including critical thinking.

What are you observing?

I will be observing how critical thinking is talked about, taught and assessed in your course. I will also be observing how students respond to these ideas in the classroom.

When will you be observing us?

I plan to observe several classes on the module XXX including both lectures and seminars. The dates for the classes I will be observing will be posted in advance online, on the module site.

What will you do with this information?

What I observe become the data I use to answer my research questions for my PhD research. For example, I may describe situations where students are thinking critically or

summarise the way critical thinking is taught. If there is time on the module I will offer a debrief in person on what I have observed and my initial data analysis. If not, I will post a summary online. The results of this research will be used in my thesis for a Ph.D. in Education. This thesis will enter the public domain once it is submitted to the University in October 2015.

Will information about me be kept confidential?

The name of your subject and the institution you are studying at will not be included in the report. Your real name will not be included in the report and if I do refer to you, I will use a pseudonym and any identifying features will be changed so as not to reveal your identity. Copies of observation notes I take will all be stored securely, in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

Who has approved this research?

The research has been approved by the University of Sussex Research Ethics Committee and has also been approved by your module convenors and heads of department.

What happens if I don't want to be observed?

If you are uncomfortable with taking part in the observation, please let me or the module convenor know. I will make sure that I do not include any information about you or your participation in the final report. If you feel that the observations will negatively affect your decision to come to class, please let me or the module convenor know and we can discuss the possibility of rearranging.

Who can I contact for further information?

If you have a question about any aspect of the research please let me know, as I am happy to address any concerns, however small. However, if you would like to speak to someone else, please contact my supervisor, Professor Louise Morley.

Researcher Contact Details:

Emily Danvers

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Supervisor Contact Details:

Professor Louise Morley

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Thank-you for letting me observe part of your first-year at university!

FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION SHEET

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Title of research project:

An exploration of undergraduate students' experiences of critical thinking in higher education

Description of research project:

The ability to think critically is increasingly viewed as a key attribute of university graduates and part of the added value of pursuing a higher education degree. In this research, I am interested in exploring first-year university students' experiences of thinking about and applying critical thinking including - how students define critical thinking, if and where students think they experienced it and what expectations, if any, they have about its impact on their education and life after university. I also hope to consider how students' ideas about critical thinking are shaped by factors including educational and life experiences, subject discipline and emotional and social concerns.

About the researcher:

My name is Emily Danvers and I am studying for a PhD at the *Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research* (CHEER) at the University of Sussex. I have previously taught academic-skills to university students and I am passionate about student learning, the student experience and equity and diversity in higher education.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You are a first-year student and you are studying one of the two subjects I have identified as being interesting for my study. You will have already been part of a class I have been observing and I may have already interviewed you in October/November 2013.

Do I have to take part?

Not at all - participation in the focus group is entirely voluntary. If you do agree to take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form making it clear what you are taking part in and what that means for you. You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with and you can also withdraw at any stage of the research without giving a reason.

What are the benefits of taking part?

This is an opportunity for you to reflect on your first-year of learning at university, to practice your critical thinking skills and to add your voice to a body of knowledge about university learning to support future higher education students. Taking part in research also gives you an insider view on what research is and how it is created which may help you with your own research in the future.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part, I will invite you to a focus group to be held on campus in May 2014. There will be approximately 8 people in the group from both subject areas I have been working with and the focus group will last between 1 hour and 1 hour and a half. In the first part of the group we will discuss some general questions about critical thinking and in the second part of the group we will discuss some case studies of critical thinkers.

With your permission, the focus group will be audio-recorded and written notes will be taken. The recordings will be transcribed and copies of the transcription will be emailed to you for your approval and comment, before I start analysing the data. However, once I have started data analysis from 1st August 2014, it will not be possible to withdraw the information that has already been included.

Will my information be kept confidential?

What we talk about in the focus group, as well as the observation data and what we talked about in the interviews will become the data I use to answer my research questions. For example, I am likely to use direct quotes from our discussions. However, the university you are studying at and the name of the subject you are studying will be anonymised and your name and other identifying features will be changed so as not to reveal your identity. Also, copies of the recordings, transcripts and any notes I take will all be stored securely, in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

What will happen to the results?

The results of this research will be used in my thesis for a Ph.D. in Education. This thesis will enter the public domain once it is submitted to the University in September 2015. With your permission, the data from this research may be used in conference presentations and academic journal articles. If you are interested, it would be great to keep in touch so I can send you my findings.

Who can I contact for further information?

If you have a question about any aspect of taking part in the research please let me know, as I am happy to address any concerns, however small. However, if you would like to speak to someone else, please contact my supervisor, Professor Louise Morley.

Researcher Contact Details:

Emily Danvers

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Department of Education

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Supervisor Contact Details:

Professor Louise Morley

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INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Title of research project:

An exploration of undergraduate students' experiences of critical thinking in higher education

About the researcher:

Emily Danvers, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Education, University of Sussex

Statement of consent:

I agree to take part in the above interview. Emily has explained the research to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet. Emily has given me the opportunity to ask questions and has addressed any concerns I have at this stage. Agreeing to take part means that, in principle, I am willing to:

- Be interviewed by Emily in October/November 2013
- Allow the interviews to be audio- recorded and written notes to be taken

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can choose not to participate. I also realise that I do not have to answer any questions that I am not comfortable with and that I can withdraw at any stage of the research without giving a reason. However, I also understand that withdrawal of my data will no longer be possible once the analysis process of the research data begins on 1st August 2014.

I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by Emily and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings. Emily has also explained that my data may be used in follow-up, institutionally approved projects related to students and higher education and I am happy for my data to be used in this way, providing my identity remains anonymous.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

Title of research project:

An exploration of undergraduate students' experiences of critical thinking in higher education

About the researcher:

Emily Danvers, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Education, University of Sussex, e.danvers@sussex.ac.uk

Statement of consent:

I agree to take part in a focus group for the above research project. Emily has explained the research to me, I have read and understood the Information Sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions and raise any concerns.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can choose not to participate in the focus group. I also realise that I do not have to answer any questions that I am not comfortable with. Out of respect for my fellow participants, I also agree to keep the content of the discussion private to those outside the group.

I agree to the focus group being recorded and understand that I will receive a copy of the transcript. I am aware that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without giving a reason. However, I also understand that withdrawal of my data will no longer be possible once the analysis process of the focus group begins from 1st August 2014.

I understand that the information I provide will be held safely and securely, that it will be anonymised and that my name and any other identifying details will not be used in the publication of any findings. Emily has also explained that my data may be used in follow-up, institutionally approved projects related to students and higher education and I am happy for my data to be used in this way, providing my identity remains anonymous.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____